Mohammad Hussain Fadhlullah

# ISLAM

## The Religion of Dialogue

Translated by
**Najim al-Khafaji**

ALMALAK Edition

ISLAM
The Religion Of Dialogue

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*

# ISLAM,
# THE RELIGION
# OF DIALOGUE

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# About the Author

As-Sayyid Mohammad Hussain Fadhlullah is a Lebanese national. He was born in 1935. He is an intellectual, a scholar in and authority on Islamic jurisprudence, a man of letters and poet; he is very well versed in politics. His social, intellectual, and politcal experience spans over fifty five years.

The author is a founder and patron of a number of charaties comprising five orphanages, two rehabilitation centres, especially for the disabled, fourteen schools and academies, one technical high institute, and places for religious worship. These charaties and schools cater for some 3,300 orphans, 350 disabled persons and 15,500 pupils and students.

Scholar Fadhlullah participated in many intellectual conferences and symposia the world over. He is renowned for his tolerance and human dialogue. He has written extensively about Islam's respect for other faiths.

The author is a prolific writer. He has written in Qur'anic exegesis, jurisprudence, Islamic thought, Islamic-Christian dialogue and other fields of the human knowledge. All these works are written in Arabic. However, some have been translated into a number of other languages.

Among as-Sayyid Fadhlullah's slogans are objectivity and opening up on others. He rejects rigidity and fossilization in thought and jurisprudence.

He does not tolerate bigotry and "*ghetto*" mentality. He does not codone oppression irrespective of the quarter perpetrating it. He upholds practising politics on the basis of justice and truthfuluess.

## Translator's Introduction

In undertaking the translation of this book, *al-Hiwar fil Qur'an* (Dialogue in the Qur'an), I have, to a large extent, echoed the singing style of the author, be it, which I have renamed "Islam, the Religion of Dialogue", in his use of figures of speech, pronouns, shuttling between the past, the present and the future and the subsequent use of the tenses, etc. I have been keen on conveying the meaning to the English reader, following the spirit and the word of the Arabic version, although not slavishly. I hope I have succeeded in this task.

Where I thought the meaning of the text would be enhanced or rendered more intelligible, I have put the additional words, which do not constitute part of the original text, between square brackets. On certain occasions, I felt the need to keep the Arabic word, which I enclosed between parentheses, alongside its English equivalent, so as to reinforce the meaning.

The masculine pronouns, such as he, his, him, and himself, refer to both the sexes, where applicable.

For the translation of the Qur'anic verses, I used The Holy Qur'an, English translation of the meanings and commentary, published by the Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, Call and Guidance. I reproduced the required texts from their website, http://www.jannah.org. However, I have made very minor changes where I deemed fit. For those who would wish to trace the Qur'anic quotations, I have given in parentheses the numbers of the *surahs* (chapters) first and the *ayahs* (verses) second.

In this translation, I relied on the eighth Arabic edition, published in 2001 CE by Dar Almalak Publishing House, Beirut, Lebanon.

Since the five introductions to the numerous Arabic editions, which have been written by the author, form, in my opinion, part and parcel of the book, I recommend that the reader give them due attention.

Najim al-Khafaji, BA, MIL
London, June 2002

# Introduction to the First Arabic Edition

**In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful**
**May praise be to God, Lord of the worlds, and may blessing and peace be with our master Mohammad and his Pure Progeny.**

At the beginning was the dialogue. The angels were chanting the praise and attributes of God, with submission and sincerity. However, God had willed to create man to be "His representative" on the earth. God made public His plan to the angels.

The dialogue started by posing the question about the nature of man, his role, and his negative and positive aspects.

The Qur'an tells the story in a nutshell: God told the angels about all that which they had raised. God wound up the debate at the point of their limited knowledge, **"Surely, I know what ye know not"**. [2:30].

Nevertheless, life on earth started in earnest; in his journey, Adam set the first step, which had resulted in shaping "the individualist man" on the way to producing "the sociable man". However, members of society have lived with conflicting needs, differing views and varying emotions. Rounds of enmity, fighting, and warring have ensued as a mode of expressing likes and dislikes by members of society.

Cain killed Abel because he wanted to affirm his individuality, as though he had no other way of venting his psychological complex. To his mind, killing was the only way out; he did not have time to talk, with a view to giving and taking.

Another chapter was opened with the advent of the prophets. They were sent to teach man the nature and power of the word – not just any word, but that which gives and takes – so as to enable members of the human race to address their problems and, through the power of the word, settle their disputes. This approach is the only window of opportunity through which man can take to communicate either calmly or vociferously.

Dialogue was the approach of prophets and the vehicle through which they delivered to man the Divine messages they were entrusted with. Right at the outset, they had wanted man to enrol in the school of

dialogue from the primary stage. They raised before him issues that could challenge his ignorance and limited scope of thinking. This was designed to stir him up to rise to the challenge, leading to some sort of reaction on his part – to question, protest, swear, rebel, throw a stone, or threaten to kill, in a bid to create in his innermost self a reaction to shake off the silence that was suffocating him. The idea was that man would learn how to aspire to the light emanating from God. Man's response vis-ä-vis the message was negative, i.e. rejecting rebellion, and waging war against it. Man disbelieved the message and attacked, and, in certain instances, killed the messengers. However, the prophets persevered and showed forbearance out of their consciousness of the nature of circumstances; they felt that they succeeded in giving man the opportunity to get to terms with his innermost feelings of doubt, perplexity, and concern, although, on the facäde, trying to give the impression of sending a conflicting message.

Yet, the ice was broken when man started arguing aggressively with the prophets in a bid to justify his rebellion. In return, the prophets reasoned with man to soften his rebellion. For their part, the prophets used nice words, only to be met by man's harsh and spiteful words. They set out to teach man how to listen to the nice words in order to learn them, perchance, he might use them later on. They used to pamper man with their tolerance, so that he might learn how he could turn it into a living example, as demonstrated by the prophets' position.

The prophets wanted to prove wrong that man's conduct was wrong through the kind of language they used to communicate with him and through their practical stands. They had sought to make him win victory over himself through defeating the impulses of crime within his psyche. The prophets showed forbearance in order to teach man how to be patient in misfortune – forbearance against self-inclinations and external challenges, forbearance to forcefully side with the truth and believe in the spirit of dialogue that tackles life's problems. These were the first lessons of dialogue man had learned from the prophets. The lessons continued to be taught by the prophets, who began to fall under the pressure of ungrateful lazy pupils, who used to dabbled in disbelief and rebelliousness. Yet, the convoy of knowledge continued with diverse means of delivery, setting life ablaze with dialogue, the similitude of which is like a torrent of water, the gushing of spring water, and a wind of change. This was in an effort to provoke the mind, stimulate the feeling, and jolt the

conscience; it also had sought to adopt a way to lead life to fulfil its grand objectives.

While life is still embracing dialogue, it suffers from violent attempts aimed at stifling it, through the pressure some quarters are trying to exert, the aggressive materialistic power they can muster, and by the narrow-minded mentalities they can groom. Before power, dialogue has remained defiant in the face of power, as the prophets had done. This aims at proving that power alone is not capable of building the nature of life man aspires to. It can be done through dialogue. Power, shorn of dialogue, will eventually prove self-destructive, for in a conflict, it would not find any tools other than stones to pelt the other side with and bullets to shoot them with, without any purposeful aim. Dialogue is the force that gives substance to what you are trying to promulgate, the aim you want to achieve, and the spirit you are living in.

Dialogue is, therefore, necessary for the continuity of life, be it in weakness or in strength, in war or in peace.

The Holy Qur'an was the last of the Divine Books which were sent to teach man how dialogue can be a way to ideology, beliefs, and work.

Through the Holy Qur'an, Islam had come to be the religion of dialogue, which allowed the intellect to think at will, to talk about anything, and debate with others on the basis of proof and evidence. The aim was to reach a conviction and new horizons by way of civilized dialogue and good counsel, and with that which is the best. Islam had progressed and so had the experiences of dialogue. Muslims had come to know how to open up to the world with their message through the climate of dialogue. Their education and experience taught them how to respect those who differed with them, with a view to winning them over on grounds of respect for their ideology and outlook.

Then as years went by, came the time of backwardness when the wider horizons of dialogue suffered a setback. This was bound to affect Islam as a religion. The adversaries spared no effort in portraying it as a religion that cannot tolerate dissent. Consequently, and in their communities, this affected Muslims, so much so that they would not stand dialogue. They had drifted away from the Qur'an to the extent that they did not adopt it as an authoritative source in their understanding of matters relating to the tenets of religion and life. Afterwards, came the forces of unbelief in the attire of colonialism to cancel out the Qur'an

from our psyche and life, suggesting to us that the way to salvation was by advocating the principles and philosophies they [the colonialists] had invented. Such principles and philosophies found their way to the hearts and minds of generations by virtue of the ideological framework put in place by Western educational systems and its "civilized" values, and perpetuated by a modern powerful imperialistic machine with all the tools of war and destruction. All of that has changed into intellectual terrorism, which has paralysed man's ability to debate the basis and details of things, let alone show any opposition.

All those factors have contributed to bringing to the fore, in the Muslim individual, feelings of intellectual inferiority in so far as the foundations of the roots and history of his doctrines are concerned. They make him feel alien to his heritage, as if it were the only road to entering the ambience of the age and raising oneself to its level. This has led Muslims to close the door of dialogue on themselves, in the belief that the subject is one that cannot be debated. This has come about through the success of Western ideology in dominating life and shaping it in its image, which claims the issue of its infallibility does not need a proof because its proponents maintain that experience confirms their claim. The story is still ongoing on ideological, life, and fate levels in a circle that highlights the positive sides, masking all the negative aspects in the domains of the spiritual, the practical and matters of destiny.

The issue of dialogue has returned to haunt, among other heavy burdens, the activists in the arena of Islamic propagation, resulting in them facing a two-pronged attack:

1. Standing up to the task of demolishing the psychological barriers that prevent a generation, bedazzled by the climate of Western civilization, from embarking on dialogue. On the one hand, this struggle has aimed at leading members of this generation to cast doubt over, pose questions about, and be concerned with their future by highlighting and making them think of the negative aspects which have been set in motion within their unstable and confused life on many levels and in many directions. On the other hand, the struggle has aimed at instigating those Muslims, infatuated with Western civilization, to consider the positive sides of Islamic ideology, be they in the field of beliefs or the law, by bringing into play the universal concepts which can address life's problems in its wider aspects; this is done with a view to making this section of Muslims weigh the pluses and minuses in an informed and open comparison.

2. Rousing the spirit of dialogue within Muslims, who consider themselves among the activists, working towards calling people to Islam. The aim is to make them recognize that the issue of entering into dialogue with others is not a matter of open or closed state of mind, practised by men as they go about their business. Rather, it is an issue of the Message in its Qur'anic steps of revelation, and in its prophetic procession of work. Accordingly, the activists should muster all the energies they can, be they spiritual, sensual, or ideological, and steer them towards the climate of dialogue, turning it into a productive one with a wider spiritual and ideological scope.

At the same time, being party to dialogue, Muslims have to strive towards availing themselves of in-depth study, research and reflection, for the current dialogue requires a higher educational level of its participants. It should be capable of moving on more than one front. This is also because the problems being discussed are not one-sided; rather their intents and purposes are multi-faceted.

It is natural that this approach should be adopted to address progress in the call to God's cause and that fresh issues should be tackled with a fresh spirit and approach. A new kind of activity, which Muslim activists were not familiar with during the times of spiritual and ideological inertia, times when they lived in a rather strange and lazy contentment that did not seem to embrace life, only with a blinkered vision in both idea and style. They also did not appear to have paid attention to the reality of the situation, which had fast outstripped them to look for new horizons, leaving them behind in utter bewilderment.

Dialogue has made a comeback to the fields of symposia, writings, and lectures after we have returned to the Qur'an afresh, to learn from it how to initiate dialogue as espoused by prophetic methods and how we move within its aspects, blending doctrine with style. This is because the atmosphere of how the prophetic message used to be delivered and how it stamped things with its hallmark have given the work a new impetus and helped enliven its spirit with much needed clarity of purpose.

The writing of this book is a humble attempt to exploreing the horizons of the Qur'anic dialogue and its bases, approaches and practical outcomes. I felt a pressing need to write the book because, to the best of my knowledge, I am not aware of the existence of any other book that has discussed the subject fully from an ideological as well as a universal perspective, i.e. the premises of dialogue and the practical examples

derived from the experiences of the prophets and others. The book is not a new attempt in Islamic cultural studies; rather, it is a step on the path of the contemporary Islamic movement, by way of discovering the common characteristics of Qur'anic dialogue that was conducted at the times of early prophetic missions. This should have an impact on the experiences of present-day Islamic activism, so that Islam can direct life with its guiding ideology, inspiring sense, and regulating law, and aspire to uphold the supremacy of God Almighty over all aspects of life, in an all-encompassing legal framework. The Holy Qur'an and prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*) can be applied in this regard in flexible interpretations, but without departing from the fountain of pristine ideology; rather, it should go forth with the aim of spreading prosperity and progress in all walks of life.

It is a modest attempt in the hope and confidence that the intelligent reading of my brothers, who are active in the sphere of the Islamic call, will provide critical remarks capable of rendering the subject that this book is trying to tackle a successful and more universal experience, an experience that encapsulates the experiences of all workers and that which they aspire to achieve.

In the end, I hope that this book achieves its objectives and that God Almighty will count it as a work in His cause and reward me for it accordingly, on the day neither wealth nor children would avail, except him who came to God with a pure heart. And let our last prayer be: May praise be to God, Lord of the worlds.

**Mohammad Hussain Fadhlullah,**
Beirut, Lebanon
15 Rajab 1396 (13 July 1976)

# Introduction to the Second Arabic Edition

**In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful**
**And may praise be to Him, and may peace**
**be with His servants whom He has chosen.**

Perhaps discussing Dialogue in the Qur'an will result in its having a cultural role to play. It aims to explain to people Islam's viewpoint on the dynamics of ideological differences, which are dominating thinking modes in life. It also aims to discuss the notion that Islam is "the religion of the sword", suggesting that it does not try to promulgate its ideology, except with the use of the sword, away from reasoning and dialogue. The discussion aspires to replace that misguided thinking with the assertion that opens all the doors that have been closed to dialogue, so that Islam will emerge as a tolerant, espousing dialogue.

However, one can pose a series of questions: Is the issue one that tries to polish the image of Islam up in the eyes of others and strive to remove the distorted one that has been portrayed by its enemies, in the same way issues are discussed, with a view to rejecting a criticism, refuting a judgement, or explaining a position, without any meaningful objective towards reality?

The answer is not going to be in the affirmative. We cannot deny the pressing need to stand up to the attempts of distortion, whose methods have varied commensurate to the goals of the forces of unbelief, in their bid to drive Islam out of the arena of ideological debate and man's life. Yet, we are not starting from the point of reaction; rather, we work on the basis that Islam's starting point is that of an informed work, relying on a well-thought-out plan, based on a solid foundation, the framework of which is ideology, faith, and reality.

Accordingly, we aim to make every effort to shape the personality of the Muslim individual in the image of pristine Islamic precepts, guiding his movements in real life. This clarity of purpose is capable of ignoring what others may want Muslims to do pursuant to their agendas. The reason being that the decisive issue for Muslims is that their work is the pursuit of God's pleasure and to be in conformity with what God has planned for man and life.

In this light, we are of the opinion that the issue of dialogue is

intertwined with the innate nature of Muslim men and women, in that Islam wants them to do their best to win over the hearts of and minds of others to the religion of God and His Law. Islam further wants his followers to be loyal, in their life, to the principles of its message; they should live this reality in whatever positions they may take, be they political, social, economic, or military. This is designed so as to teach Muslims to live Islam on all fronts, i.e. as an ideology, work, and emotion, so much so that, to them, Islam is the foundation for thought, sentiments, and life. The individual Muslim would not be able to reach that goal, unless he managed to emulate and live, through and through, the life of him who calls for the Way of God. He should experience what the Muslim activists go through out of incessant spiritual concern for others, who, while trying to win them over and is being aware of their weaknesses and strengths, would not insult their feelings to avoid inviting a negative response. He should be considerate and not rush them into accepting his standpoint with long-winded introductions on the one hand, and not to be harsh on them, be it with the type of words or body language he uses. His style should be very gentle, in order that it could make a good starting point for mutual trust and feelings. This is in order to achieve peace of mind and security – the natural entry for arriving at conclusions and convictions, and eventually the ultimate spirituality of faith.

In as much as we want ideology to be transformed into practical steps, we would like to see dialogue embodied in the person who takes part in it, the person who knows how to win over the other person by the shortest of routes and the best of styles.

What we want for this book, in its second edition, to achieve is for it to be a guide post on the long road, a beacon in the darkness of violence, a guiding star in the bewilderment of loss, and a way to stimulate dialogue in real life, so that it becomes the luminous face of Islam in its rational, docile, and serene picture; a picture that portrays and expresses a wish for peace to prevail while fighting, works for love while suppressing the urge for hatred, and always wants for man to meet with God in his thoughts, emotions, and life, so that God would be the common ground where man's aspirations in life meet.

And let our last prayer be: May praise be to God, Lord of the worlds.

**Mohammad Hussain Fadhlullah,**
Beirut, Lebanon
15 Rajab 1403 (29 April 1983)

# Introduction to the Third Arabic Edition

**In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful**
**And may praise be to Him, and may peace**
**be with His servants whom He has chosen.**

## What is the purpose of dialogue in man's life?

Is it only to debate issues that members of the human race differ over in order to reach clarity of vision and eventually find a common ground to stand on where joint positions may be taken?

Is there anything else to it?

Perhaps, what people know is one side of the coin. Yet we believe that there is more than one facet to the issue. Dialogue contributes to the cooling down of the psychological climate between its parties. This is achieved through turning the battleground into a field where the contenders agree mutual terms of reference and anything that they share in common, leading to the establishment of a situation where they exchange mutual closeness, as well as a (partially) shared ideological state; or, at least, this is the way it should be.

On another level, we have noticed that in certain situations – where the status quo is initially an arena dominated by abstract judgements, incensed views, or pre-conceived ideas stemming from superficial convictions not based on a concentrated vision, a comprehensive study, and a dynamic ideology – dialogue brings about a sea change by turning it into a meaningful process. This opens the way to delving into the idea, discussing its nature, and exploring its dimensions and background, so that through research it will deepen awareness, make the picture clearer, and put the idea in a much wider perspective.

In this way, we can make dialogue an educational tool to make convictions, albeit gradually, a programme that is worthy of credibility and gathering momentum – in the same way a child grows up – even in the simplest and most ordinary of issues. This is so as to espouse dialogue as a way to growing in mental strength, going about life through dialogue; a process that would eventually pave the way for an objective spirit in a psychological climate, doing away with emotional reactions in

handling matters of difference, accommodating the opposite view in a rational and realistic way, facing up to differing ideologies in the kind of mentality that acknowledges the fact that others have the right to adopt a different viewpoint and a particular way of thinking.

You should recognize that it is within their right to reject what they do not believe in, or ask for an irrefutable proof in order to agree with it. In so doing, we should be able to create a rational society in dealing with all kinds of issues in life, be they doctrinal, political, or social. This approach is capable of moving the conflict to a new ground, where violence has no place in resolving conflicts and disputes because it is not going to provide the parties with the ideological conviction they are seeking and nor can it bring the issues to conclusive outcomes. Rather, it may create new problems, which could bring about uncertainties and inflamed feelings precipitated by the weight of pressures, be they physical or mental. This could also lead to infringing the dignity and, encroaching on the freedoms, of the human being, and dismissing his ideology as irrelevant. As a consequence this is bound to breaed aggression as a backlash and lead to bigotry as a way of reaffirming one's individuality in the process of proving one's existence.

This is what the Holy Qur'an wanted in its plan for an Islamic society, i.e. to be both open and balanced, to spur others and lead them to think of what this society stands for. This society works towards engaging others in intellectual dialogue about their convictions. It aims at making, for the truth, an ideological base firm enough as to support its movement in life.

Yet, if the Qur'an speaks harshly of those who start from a point of disagreement with what it advocates, this should not necessarily mean that it rejects disagreement by force; rather, by virtue of their refusal to enter into dialogue and their being averse to using the tools that God has put at their disposal to acquire knowledge and reflect. This is what we want to rouse, i.e. dialogue with those who are prepared to take part in it, and rational violence to those who espouse violence as a means to suppressing thought and trampling it. This should prove the only way to reaching a decisive outcome, which is capable of settling the scores.

Finally, this discussion about dialogue in the Qur'an still represents a pressing and great need for conducting dialogue, with a view to reaching a positive end result, which would land us on a solid ground that will scarcely shake when we are faced with situations of conflict and dispute.

Perhaps the prevalence, nowadays, of frenzied violence calls for a dire need for such a quiet, sensible, and informed narrative, which can find a firm foothold in this climate of clamour that is bound to make man take leave of his senses and drive him away from his rational thoughts.

This is what made me feel that there is in the book, in its third edition, something that could benefit the people since the willingness to practicse dialogue is still the intellectual urge of life and society; both are in constant search for a tranquil start amidst this overwhelming rage we are witnessing, and in quest for a moment of silence in this outrageous uproar.

However, no matter how clamorous our surroundings may have become – as a result of the plans of the forces of unbelief, oppression, and waywardness – there remains room for dialogue, keeping an open heart and mind, objective thinking, and for a realistic position. This is the way to reaffirm our humanity and respect our servitude to God Almighty, by making Him bear witness that we have remained loyal to Him by word and deed, in that we did not succumb to any whimsical inclination, be it overreaction or casual zeal. We have set out, inspired by His verses as a code of practice, in every path we tread, with a view to building life and man on a solid base and a strong foundation.

And let our last prayer be: May praise be to God, Lord of the worlds.

**Mohammad Hussain Fadhlullah,**
Beirut, Lebanon
1 Jamadil Ula, 1405 (22 January 1985)

## Introduction to the Fourth Arabic Edition

**In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful**

May praise be to God, Lord of the worlds, and may blessings and peace be with our master Mohammad, his Pure Progeny, the elite of his companions and those who followed in their footsteps unto the Day of Judgement.

Perhaps, among the problems besetting the realities of Muslims today is the yawning gulf between theory of what they believe in and what they practice. This has adversely affected the true picture of the Muslim individual – a distorted picture of Islam as it is practised in real life, because people tend to take the picture from real life situations rather than from Islamic texts of the Holy Qur'an and Prophetic tradition. God has treated this affair as constituting a grave danger insofar as the accountability before Him is concerned.

> **O ye who believe! Why say ye that which ye do not? Grievously odious is it in the sight of God that ye say that which ye do not.** [61:/2—3].

This means dual personality, i.e. between what the cultural mentality represents in ideology and practice in real life situations. This is bound to fail to translate the ideological theory into a living experiment, leading to the chipping away of the relevance of Islam to real life, i.e. turning it into an example of an ideological state of the intellect that has gone astray as a result of misguided practice.

It is possible that the issue of dialogue is among the most important issues of Islamic logic as a vehicle that is heading to the destination of truth and in the reaching of convictions. Likewise, it is an ingredient in the dynamics of conflict in matters ideological, political, social, and the like. This is because it is the best means by which man can speak his mind in his own way, in rejecting or accepting the reasoning of others. All of this is done in a climate of security from being persecuted in active conflict. This approach is capable of crystallizing the ideas, cleansing them of impurities, clarifying much of the ambiguities, and unveiling more of the detail through the process of give and take.

However, the stumbling block is that the education system in society is

not geared towards achieving this end result. Examples of this [bad] practice abound. Within a family setting, many a parent deals sternly and harshly with their children in dismissing the ideas the kids acquire from their environment in school and public places, as they acquire new experiences from their surroundings. Power centres within society deal with its members using the same approach, since there seems to be no room for dissent under the pretext that society does not tolerate any idea that opposes what is held by those centres. The same problem permeates the positions of power in government. The rulers persecute the people, if they show a whiff of dissent against, or rejection of, their ideology, politics, or social policies; prison and/or torture would be their lot, even execution. Even within some religious circles, discussing or questioning details of certain precepts is rendered taboo, no matter how well intentioned the attempt may be. Without doubt, suppressing attempts to conceptualizse and solidify pristine Islamic values is bound to render matters of difference or dispute more blurred and bemusing.

All of this can turn Islamic society into a tool of repression and violence in handling ideological and political issues. It is certain that this would give a wrong impression about where society stands vis-ä-vis intellectual freedom within it and how matters of disagreement are dealt with. This is also bound to give a wrong message about how views are formed in the Islamic society. This runs contrary to the rational method and objective way of studying issues relating to tenets and life, where Islam espouses the submission of proof and evidence.

Some people may be of the opinion that giving ground to the opposite ideology or a multiplicity of viewpoints is liable to grant the opposing trends a great opportunity to sow confusion and cast doubt on what Muslims hold sacrosanct. They further contend that such freedom could help to spread falsehood inside the Islamic society, by virtue of the advanced means and capabilities of the proponents of these trends, which could undermine the strength of Islam from within, a strength represented by its ideological heritage. That is, although it is capable of dealing with any onslaught from such ideological power base, yet its position could be compromised due to lack of material means when it comes to the realities on the ground, as there may be other factors at play.

If some people may raise this issue, we believe that it is within Islam's right to protect its own backyard from counter ideologies. This can be

achieved by preventing others from exploiting the ignorance, backwardness, lack of education, and inability of the Muslim masses to repel the opposing, infidel, and misguided ideas. However, there remains the need for a well-thought-through and comprehensive plan to stimulate dialogue on the questions, falsities, and counter-views others pose. This can take place in scholastic circles, where men of knowledge and views could meet; it could be arranged in public forums, especially media outlets, be it print, radio, or television, where intellectuals of Islamic persuasions and others could exchange views; it could be held in symposia. Dialogue should, though, be conducted in such a manner as to motivate the people and address their beliefs without losing sight of their educational levels. This is the way to immunize the faith against all that which aims at stirring up worry and confusion in the people's mind.

As Islamists, working for the return of Islam to life – as a complete code of rule, law, and conduct – we should put in place the plan that invigorates intellectual freedom in the public arena of the *ummah* (Muslim community). This, I believe, can be achieved through conducting dialogue on all issues, with a view to arming the *ummah* with Islamic ideology in order to give it the strength to withstand counter-ideologies. This process also aims at inviting others to shape their intellectual positions on the basis of Islam. Another goal behind activating dialogue should be the movement of political freedom within the scope of practical controls that make it move within the sphere of public interest, away from all factors of exploitation and misrepresentation.

We think that absolute freedom does not exist in the universe; neither in its formative/practical context, nor does it exist in the entire world. There must, therefore, be certain limits, checks, and balances for freedom so as to enforce order and guide its steps in the right direction. There must also be no room for laying siege to political and social thinking by repression, persecution, or violence, for it would not augment thinking, nor would it deepen awareness. It would also not help to make a particular view more dominant. Responsible and well-informed debate should be the basis for achieving a human realistic equilibrium in all domains.

Since the Qur'an is the book of dialogue, as this book is attempting to clarify, we ought to work towards creating the society of dialogue in which Islam opens its arms to all other modes of thinking, and in which

the Islamic society opens its doors to all other societies. That said, it is essential that dialogue is protected with controls that are capable of protecting it from exploitation for ulterior motives. The fact that dialogue is not trouble-free should not necessarily mean that we should do away with it. On the contrary, this should prod us into studying these problems within its activity. In so doing, we would make the best out of both worlds – dialogue with responsibility and freedom with accountability within a general order for the *ummah*.

We are facing a barrage of accusations that try to distort the true picture of Islam, in its rational objective approach, and intellectual prowess, within a setting of dialogue. This concerted effort aims at shaping Islam in the mould of a religion that rejects both reason and logic, tries hard to infringe intellectual freedoms, and appeals to people through their base needs and not through the depth of their wits.

The conduct of Muslim activists – be it in private or public, in ideological or political issues in the arena of conflict – mounts a great defence against all these false and unjust accusations. It is indicative of the fact that Islam is strong by virtue of its ideology and dynamism. That is, it is capable of mounting a viable challenge to any counter ideology/move, in all domains, with objectivity and forceful vision for real life situations and changing circumstance. The requisite conduct recognizes, at the same time, that Islam is well aware that those who wage war against it, ignoring the logic of dialogue, must, as a consequence, face up to reciprocity, should peaceful dialogue goes unheeded and eventually prove futile.

In this book, we have done our best to raise a raft of ideas concerning dialogue as a Qur'anic code of practice for Islam, man, and life. We hope that it will contribute towards creating some stimulus on the ground, all in the cause of man and society that are governed and guided by dialogue.

May praise be to God, Lord of the worlds.

**Mohammad Hussain Fadhlullah,**
Beirut, Lebanon,
17 Shawwal 1407 (14 June 1987)

# Introduction to the Fifth Arabic Edition

**In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful**

May praise be to God, Lord of the worlds, and may blessings and peace be with our master Mohammad, his Pure Progeny, the elite of his companions and those who followed in their footsteps unto the Day of Judgement.

In its human content, the question of dialogue is concerned with shaping the human personality on a social level, where man recognizes his relationship with his fellow human beings. Such affinity is based on the collaboration of members of society to put together ideology, programme, and dynamics. This should be guided by terms of reference, espousing a shared ideological outlook, varied rational and emotional approaches, and dynamism towards building life, developing and changing it with a view to bringing equilibrium to both its path and goal.

This is the difference between man living cocooned – shutting himself away from his fellow humans in both his mode of thinking and emotions – and living life to the full. This can be put into practice in the domains of knowledge and meeting others as one human being affected by another, both of whom meet, exchange views, discuss personal issues and so on. The end result should be exchanging experiences in a process of interaction that is characterized by being intellectual, spiritual, and practical.

Dialogue represents the facet of life in its dynamic dimension; on the other hand, non-dialogue stands for death in its stillness and frigidity. Inasmuch as society can be alive or dead, still or dynamic, it can open up to dialogue or be closed to it. The first type of society is capable of developing in all departments – ideologically, spiritually, and dynamically – whereas, generally speaking, the other society experiences the inertia in all these departments.

This issue does not relate to the general guidelines of the human intellectual activity; rather, it overreaches them to permeate the practical political aspect of the dialogue between the ruler and the ruled, between the people themselves, and between peoples of the world, in political, legal, social, economic, and security matters, which concern them as

humans. Thus, an arrogant ruler, i.e. one who does not care about what his people want or do not want, or who does not conduct a dialogue with them on personal or public issues, should be irrelevant. On the other hand, a nation whose members do not live up to their responsibility in studying the ruler's programme and holding him accountable – with a view to rectifying his conduct, should he go astray, strengthening his position when he does the right things, and undermining same when takes leave of his senses – is also irrelevant.

It should be stressed, however, that the ongoing dialogue between those in power and the people could be the catalyst that steers political life away from violence when it comes to addressing critical issues of political realities between the ruler and the ruled. Our meticulous study of the cycle of violence in our Islamic world has proved that its roots lie in the loss of the freedom that enables people to express their critical views, tender their alternative programmes, and set out in the process of change from the point of aspiring to what is best for their public life. The other factor that contributes to the prevalence of the cycle of violence relates to the conception of the ruler, when he sees himself as a tyrant on the earth; others have no right to conduct a dialogue with him, criticisze him, or bring him to book, because – according to him, his law, and powers – this amounts to committing a crime. This is bound to stifle political debate and push the people to resort to violence in the name of revolution, in an effort to express their rejection of a particular line of thinking, movement, or rule as the case may be.

However, we have found that civilized nations take to dialogue as a means of discussing their political or ideological differences; this debate could be stormy at certain times and calm at others. In most cases, this debate does not reach the level of physical or armed violence.

God Almighty sent the prophets with His message as paradigms to be emulated by man – man who is not constrained from conducting dialogue on all that he thinks of and wants to discuss. However, the problem the prophets faced was that the people they were sent to did not believe in dialogue, for their reactions to what the prophets called them to did not stem from intellectual argument. Rather, it stemmed from churning out statements that they held as tacit assumptions, which they were not prepared to enter into dialogue on or relinquish. That was so, because they did not live the spirit of dialogue, not recognizing that others had a different view and approach, and that it was within their

right to conduct such dialogue, as, perchance, it could have some truth in it, if not the whole truth. This is the way dialogue should be conducted – mutual recognition of both the parties to dialogue, as, perhaps, when you try to argue with the other party to embrace the faith, they may ask you, in the name of justice and fairness, to reason with them, and not to dismiss them outright.

I believe that the reasons behind the entrenched position of the rejecters of dialogue are two-pronged.

The first reason can be traced to an arrogant mentality that looks down on others as inferior to them and, subsequently, irrelevant. In their eyes, others are not up to the standard, which entitles them to be given the opportunity of taking part in dialogue, in that they perceive them as subordinates not equal partners. And, according to the rejecters, they must be kept in check, for, they think that their duty is to follow and obey, not to argue or even try to make the tyrants see their side of the argument.

These people think that social rank is the criterion by which dialogue with others should or should not be conducted. Thus, people of the same level of the social pecking order could enter into a dialogue. Conversely, those who are not should not be given the right of doing so, for, to their mind, this detracts from the standing of people of a higher rank by virtue of the social or political clout they can wield.

The second reason can be attributed to the intellectual feebleness, which characterizes this group and, as a result, prevents them from standing up to the other view, because these people lack the strength of proof that could lend credibility to their standpoint in a debate, or have the rational logic, which could refute the counter-argument. As a way out, the feeble-minded may, in an attempt to cover their shortcomings, resort to exaggerating, finger pointing, and sharp reactions that could incite the superficial popular feelings and push them towards taking demagogic positions towards the innovative ideology. An example can be drawn from the Holy Scripture – Pharaoh's stance against Moses. Pharaoh wanted to inflame the popular feelings against Moses by suggesting that Moses wanted to uproot them from their homeland. This approach can be found in the positions of many a ruler towards the exponents of innovative ideology by whipping up hysteria among the people and pushing them into taking demagogic positions, in a bid to scaring away the public mentality from both their thinking and agenda.

Among the problems plaguing the dynamism of dialogue in life, one is the entrenched bigotry with which people view, and cling to, their ideological heritage and traditions; it could also be due to polarized positions vis-ā-vis their social or political persuasions. This could be attributed to the intolerant and highly strung attitude with which they approach the counter-argument, i.e. in not budging when it comes to the views they hold, whether sectarian or partisan, regardless of the probabilities of right and wrong of these perceptions. Maybe, it is because they have become part of their psyche and come to epitomize what they perceive as dignity, power, and social or political clout. As such, the issue does not seem one of ideology so much as it is one of the framework inside which they move, regardless of the nature of portrait inside the frame.

What Islam, in this day and age, seems to be suffering from is the absence of the spirit of dialogue within the mosaic of its schools of thought regarding the detail of tenets and *Sharia* law, as interpreted by each and every school. That is, to their mind, this would detract from the state of rigidity, which the proponents of sectarianism would want for their strands of thought or jurisprudence. This could stem from the fact that dialogue may contribute to shaking them to their roots and, consequently, to making them susceptible to falling under the weight of conclusive evidence, which would prove its falsity and remoteness from the truth. It seems that, the advocates of this position have become victim to a blinkered view – that sectarianism has been transformed into some kind of social apartheid that makes all the followers of a particular sect stand in a position completely different from that of the followers of the other sect. This has led to more entrenched positions – geographical, social, and political, – in certain situations, so much so that a compromise from one party to another could be considered as a kind of political and social suicide that may affect the entire society.

This phenomenon is not confined to the sectarian divide; rather, it is found within any given Islamic school of thought. It could be the case that the forerunners among the intellectuals, who happen to advocate different views, do not feel free to express them and enter into debate with others to discuss same. This is particularly so, when such viewpoints clash with sentimental historical aspects of some holy personages, or they may clash head on with the details of doctrinal and juridical positions that form part of the body of tradition, which have been handed down by bygone generations.

As a result, some Islamic schools of thought have lost the ability to introduce change into their ideological heritage; rather, they have usually shown an unusual inflexibility that has no room for change or movement. This state of affairs has come about as a result of the excitable mentality, which could border on the demagogic, with which they hold their views, i.e. being irrefutable truths, which no body has the right to question because they are the views of a bygone good generation or of famous scholars (*ulema*), and so forth.

We believe that the absence of dialogue between Muslims, across the sectarian divide or within the sects themselves, is doing disservice to Islam as it is lived in the real world, both internally and externally. This is bound to leave Islam bogged down with its sectarian or juridical affairs, away from the other horizon where its ideology can have an opportunity to look at other ideologies and approaches.

It should be noted, however, that this conduct runs contrary to Islamic practice throughout its history, especially the Qur'anic way of dealing with all sorts of issues. The Qur'an tells us of many examples where dialogue was conducted with the unbelievers, the polytheists, and the hypocrites in an objective and rational manner. This is because the Qur'an is confident that this proof is such as to make the other side see the strength of, and sense, its argument. It also rises to the challenge of criticism with an open mind.

In bringing this issue to the fore, we do not want to wage war on the mode of thinking of bygone good Muslim ideologues of different schools of thought. Rather, we want to create the right climate to think afresh of the ideas and convictions they exerted, as we might find such convictions lacking in some departments so that we may put right, a straying we may rectify, or a flaw we may fix.

Religious scholars of bygone days used to differ among themselves, even within the same school of thought, without them perceiving such differences as a threat to religion or to that particular sect, because they recognized that there was a difference between the sanctity of original truth in religion or school of thought, on the one hand, and the sanctity of interpreting this text or that, or confirming this view or the other, on the other hand. So, why do we have to view with sanctity that which they did not, i.e. of their interpretations, and shy away from questioning it in an intellectual process, with a view to delving into it to winnow the chaff from the grain.

The value of dialogue in the Qur'an is that it did not define the subjects of dialogue, in that there are no taboos on what subject you want to discuss, nor did it name who can or cannot enter into the dialogue. Thus, there is no problem in conducting a debate with any person. This is indicative that the crux of the matter is that all of us are in search of the truth. So, why do not we co-operate, by way of dialogue, to get to it, and not aim at fault finding in a closed dialectic manner?

This book has been an attempt to uncover the Qur'anic approach to dialogue; it could be that it is the first book that discusses this subject.

As I introduce the book, in its fifth edition, all I hope for is that my effort will prove worthwhile, in aspiration that this experiment will be made complete by conducting further research and different dialogues. I pray to God Almighty to bestow success on me to continue in the service of Islamic thought, in the arena of challenges, and in the service of modern day Islam in the field of struggle, for this is what makes us vibrant in our mission and aim in the movement of Islam in life.

May praise be to God, Lord of the worlds. His is the best of rewards and He is the best Trustee.

**Mohammad Hussain Fadhlullah**
Beirut, Lebanon
4 Rajab 1416 (29 November 1995)

# Foreword

## Misconceptions about religion

It has been said that religions call on people to accept their idea without discussion or debate. The advocates of this view further argue that this is bound to make redundant the role of man's intellect in what he would want to embrace or reject, a contention that cancels out any part dialogue might play in issues of religious thinking.

They allege that the difference between science and religion is that science puts the idea forward to be discussed and questioned in an effort to examine all its aspects and dimensions, with a view to proving it, where proof is needed, or refuting it, if need be; all this is done through the tools of cognition made available to man.

It is further maintained that religion presents people with a host of "irrefutable truths", which neither leave ample room for give and take, nor allow the opportunity for debate on account of being final sacrosanct ideology. Thus, the notion of "blind faith", which has characterized religious thinking in the view of many a man in the world, has been born.

Some might justify this as being the result of religions coming into existence to provide answers to man's perplexity about the universe and life. This had come about during a backward stage of man's mental and ideological development, as he was not clear in mind, subservient to a sense of weakness that crushed all the energy he possessed; this could have been utilized to boost his strength. This state of affairs made man feel annihilated before the cosmic powers around him. Man had thus concluded that he did not know anything about his surroundings and did not want to do anything to acquire the necessary knowledge to help him deal with the situation.

At that stage of man's life, faith constituted the window which provided him with the interpretation of what was taking place around him, on the one hand, and gave him the instructions on what to take and what to leave out, on the other. He accepted all this with satisfaction and submission, tinged with comfort, and without another outlook to try to discern the matter or show dissent. All that mattered to him was that he

saw the light through that window, albeit all the other windows were shut to him. Hence, the coming to terms with the status quo of peace of mind and comfort.

Conversely, science was the result of man's rebellion against superstitions and his aspiration to acquire knowledge and search for science to help him think, and not suffice himself with following instructions. This has also given him the drive to search for the truth by any means, including any sacred doors that might have been closed to it. Thus, he set out in search of all that could unlock the doors and open the windows to let sunlight and fresh air come in, so that man could breathe it with freedom. Scientific methods have responded to all these aspirations and allowed the inquisitive man to go on a search-and-find journey for the truth and transform the intellects that are passive and afflicted with inertia into dynamic ones where all tools of knowledge to unveil the truth are used.

On that account, man is in constant activity, and if his intellect experiences a lull, it is followed by a period of eruption to uncover new obscurities on the way of acquiring new knowledge. Thus, the proponents of this argument maintain that religion slammed the door in the face of dialogue only to be welcomed by science, because the former is only in need of a climate of stillness and constancy. That, they maintain, gives religion the strength of continuity, whereas science champions dynamism, change, and renovation, qualities that are integral parts in its development and growth in the journey of life in its search for knowledge for the sake of life.

### A prevalent view

In a nutshell, that has been an oùtline of the views about religion and science that are advocated by many people as foregone conclusions. This approach has affected the overall conduct of man, who is in search of knowledge, vis-ä-vis the cleric or scientist. This tendency has created a climate of embarrassment and inhibition on the part of the layman as to what he can ask the clergyman about and what he cannot. On the other side of the spectrum, the story is different, in that a climate of freedom and openness is prevalent. Man is free to raise any question with those active in the scientific disciplines, apart from religious affairs.

Yet, does this concur with the true picture of religion in what it stands for? And is the picture as they have painted? This is the question we wanted this book to provide the answer for.

## History and the *Sharia* law

At the outset, we should shed some light on what we believe in and show the flaws in the black portrayal of religion.

We reject this portrayal of religions in general and of Islam in particular. We believe that the idea in question emanates from individual practices of some religious establishments of old. They seem to have espoused a particular strand of thought based on the inviolability they enjoyed. This had gained these establishments the sort of sanctity that others would not dare to voice dissent against or question the views and interpretations they advanced, requiring their followers to follow without discussion or debate.

The said religious establishments did not stop there, but tried to suppress the counter-arguments and practised torture against those who advocated them, in a demagogic frenzy, which did not leave room for the opposite view to defend itself, as was the case in Europe in the dark ages. The church set up courts to try scientists who discovered the revolution of the earth and other scientific theories that were at loggerheads with the then held view of the church. Having accused the scientists of heresy, the courts found them guilty; some were sentenced to death and others were sent to the dungeons. This historical detail might have a bearing on the birth of that idea.

As for Islamic history, there have been instances where thought was suppressed because it went contrary to the line of thinking towed by the official religious establishment. An example of this was the issue of the creation of the Qur'an, which was championed by the Abbasid rule at the time of al-Mu'tasim. It had led the establishment to persecute some religious scholars who were opposing it, such as Ahmed bin Hambel, who was imprisoned for his views.

As for the general trend, Islam was on the side of intellectual freedom, which respected the views of others and discussed them, provided that they did not translate into actions that aimed at sowing anarchy and destruction and breached the peace and order. Reports in Islamic history abound of seminars of dialogue held for Muslim and non-Muslim clerics, scholars, and the proponents of anti-Islamic beliefs, under the watchful eye of the rulers, yet in a climate of intellectual freedom. An example of this is the symposium held by the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'moun for the eighth Imam of the Progeny of the Prophet, Ali bin Mousa ar-Ridha

(a.s.). Present in that meeting were Christian, Magian, and other scholars, where the dialogue demonstrates historical evidence on the extent of the open-mindedness of Islam and its tolerance in the field of faith.

Another example can be found in the intellectual circles that used to be held by Imam Ja'far bin Mohammad as-Sadiq, the sixth Imam of the Progeny of the Prophet (a.s.) in the Sacred Grand Mosque at Mecca, where heretics and unbelievers of those days, such as Ibnil Muqaffa'a, Ibna Abil Awja'a, and Abu Shakir ad-Disani, argued with the Imam on issues of the existence of God, His wisdom, and other doctrinal matters in a challenging manner. He used to reason with them in a sweet language and calm manner, substantiating his argument with conclusive evidence, so much so that he used to leave them with no alternative but to give in.

Some of the people who were present in those intellectual circles have reported on the proceedings and the atmosphere of those symposia and the spirit with which the dialogue was conducted. On the story of a heretic who was debating with the Imam the issue of the existence of God, al-Mufadhal bin Omer had this to describe his feelings:

> *I could not restrain myself out of anger and hatred for that man, saying: O you enemy of God! You abandoned the religion of God and reneged on the Creator who created you in the best of fashions, and tended you throughout the different stages of your life till this moment. If you reflect on yourself and believe your instinct, you should have found the evidence of the craft of His Lordship's creation very well manifested in you.*

Al-Mufadhal carried on reasoning with and reprimanding the man,

> *Should you be counted on the party of speculative theology, we would have debated the issue with you. If you show us the strength of your argument, we would follow you. However, if you are not one of them, we have nothing to do with you. If you are among the followers of Ja'far bin Mohammad, this was not the way he used to communicate with us, nor with the same type of proof you are advancing he used to put his side of the argument to us. He used to listen to our words more than you did; yet he was not harsh with us, nor was he impolite in his answers. He is the most gentle of men, the wisest and most composed. He used to bear himself in a highly dignified manner; he used to listen to us attentively in order to acquaint himself fully with our case; once*

*we have finished, in the belief that we have won the day, he would refute our view with the shortest and most plane of speeches; on that account, he would leave us speechless, and we would be left with no choice but to see the strength of his argument. So, if you are among his followers, approach us then with the kind of address he used with us.*

It should be stressed, though, that whatever gems Islamic history has to tell us about, the issue is not entirely that of the history of those practices, although it may have a great bearing on proving the nature of thinking that governs history and controls its movement. However, we ought to have knowledge about the originality of the idea in the body of the *Sharia* law and the ideology of the faith. And let this be the yardstick against which we measure the nature of historical evidence we are presented with or that which others challenge us by, the current practices about which we take issue with them, and, lastly, the kind of steps we are contemplating, guided by this ideology.

## The Qur'an, the Book of Dialogue

The Holy Qur'an is the Book of God, which, **"No Falsehood can approach it from before or behind it"** [41:42]. It is, therefore, the final word in all that God would want and what He would not. It is the conclusive truth into which doubt cannot creep, **"This is the Book; in it is guidance, sure without doubt, to those who fear Allah"** [2:2].

It is the Book that should be given its due share of careful study, with a view to finding the evidence of religious dialogue concerning all questions of belief – from the notion of the existence of God and His unity down to the articles of faith.

In the life of Islam and Muslims, the Holy Qur'an represents the school in which Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) and his companions were taught the different approaches for dialogue within the main framework of the Islamic perspective. On a practical front, they were inspired by the Qur'anic example, which would take dialogue to its natural destination within the dynamics of life and faith.

Here, we are setting out on a calm tour with the Qur'anic verses, which tell us of the means God wanted His Prophet (s.a.w.) to use in inviting people to embrace Islam. In so doing, we will be able to gain knowledge about the Prophet's mission in calling to the way of God, and be guided by his practical approach in what we are trying to achieve in the way of propagating Islam.

In the process, though, we may need to trace some of the Prophet's practices, from his holy tradition (*Sunnah*), in administering dialogue for it stands for the practical application of the Qur'anic approach, which laid down the foundation and erected the edifice.

While we are dwelling on this type of narrative, it should not escape our mind, however, that the discussion is not going to be confined to what the Qur'an portrays of the Prophet's approach to dialogue; rather, we will discuss the practices of dialogue of other prophets in their struggle with the opponents of their missions and their urging people to the way of God, as is reported in the Qur'an in more than one chapter (*surah*). This is because the reference in the Qur'an to those experiences did not stem from a desire to convey history but rather, from the fact that those experiences represent pioneering examples worthy of being followed, for they are the embodiment of the most sublime of approaches in situations of intellectual struggle throughout the prophets' missions. This is worthy of making us search for the strong aspects which would guide our steps in the journey to the destinations where the practical missions can be found.

In all of this, we aim to detect the flaws in the argument directed against religion that it fights dialogue and calls for blind faith. In so doing, we should be able to find out how Islam makes the foundation of dialogue the starting point of its steps on the way to calling people to embrace its principles and live life. We aim to uncover all this in the Book of God, which transforms belief into a continuous position for dialogue, starting with man's soul, and whose spirit and revelation permeate all domains of life unto the hereafter. There, dialogue comes to a halt, giving way to the most decisive of dialogues, i.e. that before God, when man must answer for his actions in this life and eventually be handed down the sentence of either going to paradise or hell.

## Terms of reference

Having limited the research to this narrative, we have to stress that we are not about to embark on a cultural one, but aspire to capture the aesthetic elements within the attempt of assessing the technical side of dialogue and its Qur'anic approaches. This is not the place for such research. We may, however, find an excellent approach to it in Sayyid Qotb's book, *at-Tasweerul Fanni fil Qur'an* [Artistic Style in the Qur'an].

Rather, all we are trying to do is to lay our hands on the approach where it is related to the intellectual or the emotional climate of thinking, and in as much as the sensual, intellectual, and spiritual ingredients can be found throughout its aspects and characteristics.

# *Chapter I*

# Dialogue and Dispute

Man has experienced the meaning of these two words in both his life and psyche since he started his journey in social life, where a myriad of ideas and thoughts can be found. This presents man with the opportunity of discovering whether they make sense in real life situations, where conflict and dispute are rife.

Man may make a move with the intention of making clear his idea, in the hope that he wcould be able to make it so intelligible that there would be no room left for a question to be raised against it or for a differing view to be precipitated by insufficient information, which might render it lacking in certain areas. This is the arena of self-dialogue at certain times, and mutual one dialogue at others. In this process, thought starts a long journey, peppered with many stops on the road to maturity. This is what we mean by the word "dialogue" (*al-hiwar*).

It may be the case that, at other times, man finds himself in a situation where he has no alternative but to rush into the fray to defend his view against opponents. The situation would then change to a clash characterized by hit and run, attack and defend. It would be dominated by a climate of mental, psychological, and verbal tension – all in an effort to carry the day, should there be room for victory, or to reach a compromise, should there be common ground.

This is what the word "dispute" (*al-jadal*) suggests to us, in that it tries to give us the meaning of a dialogue that exists in a climate of differing ideologies and doctrines, whereas the first word [dialogue] suggests more than that.

## The word "dialogue" in the Qur'an

The two words in question have been mentioned in the Qur'an in many places. The first word, dialogue (*al-hiwar*) has been used less than the second, dispute (*al-jadal*); it is mentioned in three verses (*ayahs*), two of which are in the chapter "*al-Kahf*" (the Cave), telling the story of the

owner of two orchards and his argument with his friend, who was not as affluent as the former:

> **(Abundant) was the produce this man had: he said to his companion, in the course of a mutual argument: 'more wealth have I than you, and more honour and power in (my following of) men'.** [18:34].

"His companion said to him, in the course of the argument with him:

> **'Dost thou deny Him Who created thee out of dust, then out of a sperm-drop, then fashioned thee into a man?'"** [18:37].

The third verse where this word is mentioned is in the chapter "*al-Mujadalah*" (the Pleading One) in the story of the woman who came to the Messenger of God (s.a.w.), complaining of her husband:

> **"God has indeed heard (and accepted) the statement of the woman who pleads with thee concerning her husband and carries her complaint (in prayer) to God: and God (always) hears the arguments between both sides among you: for God hears and sees (all things)".** [58:1].

## "Dispute" in the light of challenges

The second word has been mentioned in twenty- seven places in the Qur'an, in private and public issues, ranging from the religious, which deals with both doctrine and life, to the social.

Perhaps, the underlying reason for all the space the word has occupied in the Qur'an – in what Islam was to contend with or in the situations man lived in of situations – is that this has been the closest to the realities Islam has lived in. It has faced ideological as well as traditional challenges, which form part of man's mind; this goes hand in hand with the movement towards change with which Islam has wanted for man's inner self and intellect to be challenged, with a view to moving him away from the darkness of doubt, unbelief, and going astray to the light of faith, unity of God, and guidance.

Islam also has had to face external challenges put up by an array of forces, be they religious, social, or political, which were running man's life in the communities that did not believe in Islam. Those forces did their best to slow, if not stop, the progress of Islam, using all tools at their disposal. This was through the protracted debilitating wars they waged, obstacles they put in its way, doubts they raised, dubious means they used to sow doubt, perplexity, and fear in what Islam has offered of as

guidance and solutions to life's problems. On this basis, Islam has stood its ground in the face of all those challenges and fought them with vigour, driven by a desire to get to the truth and let the views meet with its concepts, not through wanting to have victory for the sake of winning *per se*.

Thus, Islam has taken to conducting debate that is based on direct dialogue, which emanates from advancing the idea in the arena of struggle. This has been in an effort to invite the exchange of questions and answers in order to spare the time and effort of the disputants. That is, they do not need to look for any questions they could not find readily or that they might have found difficult to search for them. This is in an effort to instil deep the idea into man's mind and provoke forcefully his thoughts. That is the reason why, in the Qur'an, Islam has discussed the issue of debate within oneself alongside that conducted with members of social groups, including those opposing Islam's views.

It did not stop there. Rather, it tried to immortalize all that which was raised about debate on tenets in order to give rise to the idea that it is necessary to keep this practice alive as far as issues of belief and life are concerned.

### "Dialogue" contains the element of "dispute"

We prefer to use the word "dialogue" in the title of this book, albeit the words "dispute" and "argument" occupy more space in the Qur'anic narrative and style, for two reasons:

1. The word "argument" has taken on a new connotation, in that it denotes the mode adopted by both the parties to the argument. They tend to wrangle aimlessly, so much so that their squabble seems a kind of intellectual luxury – with digressions and winding verbal discussions taking place, which would weigh heavily on the topic being debated, taking it nowhere.

Maybe, the reason for this is that arguing for the sake of argument has turned into some sort of exercise taken to by many who aim to train in the means of give and take, and attack and defend in the arena of intellectual struggle. This is done in a bid to defeat the opponent save getting with them to the truth or to a conclusion. That is why we did not want our discussion to be branded with this hallmark at the outset.

2. The word dialogue has, as we have already mentioned, wider implications than dispute or argument, each of which imply that there is

an element of struggle. The former is flexible enough to accommodate the said element and more, on the way to making the subject matter clearer through question and answer. This is more akin and beneficial to our discussion, because, here, we have set out to espouse dialogue that makes its starting point with advancing the idea, even if there are no challenges posed. We also espouse the dialogue that mounts a defence of the idea, in the arena of struggle, against the challenges of its enemies and opponents alike. This is to fulfil our goal in this discussion of uncovering the mechanics of the approach that was put across by the then Islamic activism, within the boundaries of dialogue – in all its domains –, so that we can make use of it in broadening the appeal of contemporary Islamic activism, which is faced with the same situation on two fronts:

(a) Defence against misconceiving Islam, a drawback, which we are still suffering from. This has been the result of misguided intellectual practices, or a mistaken and shaky presentation of Islam.

(b) Defence against the challenges mounted by others who may perceive "blurring" in Islam's vision of, and solutions for, the questions of life and intellectual and doctrinal issues.

**Indirect dialogue**

In this discussion, we may come across the approach that does not seem to have room for real dialogue, in that we may see two people engaged in an argument for the sake of argument. Islam, on the other hand, would like people to engage in dialogue on issues of faith, in order to reach the goal. Accordingly, this approach represents a natural entry into dialogue.

However, reference made to this approach should not signal a departure from the subject we are discussing. That is, it is incumbent on the people who took it upon themselves to call others to the way of God to invite them to engage in dialogue, cause them to do so by example, and reciprocate when they invite them to do so. In all this, they should be in the thick of dialogue at one time, or on the way to it at another, right from the first step on the road of discovery.

We should follow the example of the Qur'an in refuting certain utterances or allegations spouted by some people, from whom Islam differs with either on ideological grounds or in some aspects of life. Thus, the issue should be put on a course that is capable of making those allegations not just a mere viewpoint that cannot be challenged or a

question that cannot find an answer. This is worthy of recognition as a start of a dialogue in the activity of doctrine or legislation for life and society. This will manifest itself in the dynamics of dialogue, on the questions of belief, with idolaters, atheists, and deniers of prophecy, among the People of the Book and others. The Qur'an reports their points of view and arguments, and then responds to them, in order to put the whole issue in a dialogue setting. Qur'anic dialogue may try to put across, as examples, some excellent and well- depicted dialogue practices and personages, so that people are aware of them, with a view to following their examples in real life situations.

We may come across other examples that are completely the opposite, where dialogue aims to depict some evil personalities by narrowing the narrative to issues that can uncover important sides of the personality being discussed. This gives us an insight into many unpleasant human specimens in life, so that we may guard against taking them as examples, especially in critical matters.

On a third level, the rationale behind dialogue would be the clarification of positions on life and our mission in it, through discussing certain aspects pertaining to them in either short or long dialogues.

In this light, the discussion on dialogue will start with laying down general guidelines for the methods of debate and managing struggle in the dynamics of Islamic activism, on the one hand, and in the domain of highlighting the original features of some examples of good or evil in society, on the other.

# How did Dialogue and Dispute Come About?

## Human nature

The Holy Qur'an has this to tell us about man:

> **We have explained in detail in this Qur'an, for the benefit of mankind, every kind of similitude: but man is, in most things, contentious. [18:54].**

We could learn from this holy verse that the quality of argument is one that is intrinsic to man's nature, in the same way that his other innate characteristics that put him in a different league from other creations. Man was fashioned in a way that makes him face life and all that it is rife with – of situations, incidents, complexities, and notions – with a mentality that is open, yet concerned. No wonder, he is in constant search for a given thing and its antithesis, and truth and falsehood, in the same measure, taking issue with this or arguing with that. No sooner has he reached a conclusion than he harbours doubt, in a new journey towards doubt; and no sooner has he settled with the latter than he starts a long journey towards certitude.

Such are the varying ideas and views, that each stage of man's life is different commensurate to the issues and discussions that take place within that stage and according to the general situation that is prevailing then, which may impose a particular point of view or another. This is bound to make intellectual matters develop, rise, and inflate, leaving behind numbers of followers and supporters, who, in the life of the human race, constitute different circles characterized by particular qualities, be they intellectual, economic, social or political.

In this climate, wrangling comes to the fore and turns into a means of persuasion at one time, justification at a second, or playing with words and concentrating on rhetoric in order to manipulate concepts at a third. Many parties resort to this attitude, with the aim of entering into ideological and doctrinal struggle in the hope of carrying the day, yet they could taste, in the process, the bitterness of defeat.

## The divine strategy

It goes without saying that, in such circumstances, truth has to square up to all of this, using similar, or even superior, methods because the way to humans' hearts and minds is not traffic-free. It is jammed with many concepts and views, which may obscure the truth from him or make his vision narrow. It requires great effort to clear the road to man's intellectual and doctrinal life, using the most suitable and effective ideas and styles.

Islam has been very close to this climate. It has, therefore, desired to plan the journey of man to belief without coercion.

There, dialogue between either differing or conflicting parties took place. There was dispute, which gave dialogue the dimension of persistence and strength of feeling about the idea being debated; and there came into play the proofs and counter-proofs of each party to the dialogue or wrangle. Thus, the strength of the argument lent the idea a sound base on which it could anchor itself.

These were the guiding stars for man's steps on the journey to present him with the issues of truth and falsehood, practicsing his free will in accepting the former or rejecting the latter, as is evident from this Qur'anic verse:

> **that Allah might accomplish a matter already enacted; that those who died might die after a clear Sign (had been given), and those who lived might live after a Clear Sign (had been given)).** [8:42].

# The Islamic Characteristics of Dialogue

## Rejected type of argument

As has already been mentioned, dialogue and dispute did not function in Islamic thought only to be as independent arts, able to provide life with the type of intellectual zest that is capable of taking part in any discussions about any subject, as is the case of the intellectual way that Plato has wanted for argument to follow. He was of the opinion that the argumentative side of dialogue was deliberate and came in the first place and the desire to solve philosophical issues came second in the order of importance. Plato said:

> *Dialogue determines a subject to be investigated, not necessarily for the aim of finding a solution for it; it is designed to make us better equipped to handle argument on all topics. The aim of dialogue is, therefore, not providing us with information and knowledge about the subject matter insomuch as it lends us support in the process of mastering the art of argument*[1].

The reason for the difference between the two approaches can be attributed to the fact that Islam's main objective for engaging in dialogue is to showing human beings the truth, in a way that is capable of deepening their faith and giving them peace of mind. Islam's practical means for dialogue are, therefore, geared towards achieving this goal.

In certain circumstances, man might be encouraged to train in the art of debate outside the climate of ideas. This, however, does not stem from an intellectual vacuum, satisfying man's instinct towards gaining the upper hand; rather, it makes available to him the tools for defending truth in a manner that is more forceful, yet flexible. A similitude is a soldier, who spends long periods of time in military drills in preparation for fighting the real enemy in a decisive battle.

We can detect, in the Holy Qur'an, features of this line of thinking, which is aimed at rejecting debate on account of its being as an

[1]The History of Historical Thought vol.1, p. 170.

independent art whose professionals turn into people obsessed with arguing, with no apparent objectives, other than dealing a blow to their adversaries, or turning in a vicious circle in a bid to waste time and depart from the main goal. This is bound to contribute to a distortion of the intellectual faculty of man, in that it could make him far removed from self-evident truths, by virtue of being tied down to far-fetched hypotheses, which fuel wrangling and obscure man's vision from seeing reality.

## Qur'anic pictures

The Holy Qur'an has depicted all this in more than one verse. This has appeared in the context of its narrative about the unbelievers who espoused wrangling as a way of confounding the idea, being debated, and refused to have any thing to do with the truth, although they could see it. The Qur'an has spoken of the position and response of Makkah's polytheists, after they had listened to the verses about Jesus, son of Mary (a.s.):

> **"When (Jesus) the son of Mary is held up as an example, behold, thy people raise a clamour thereat (in ridicule)! And they say, "Are our gods best, or he?" This they set forth to thee, only by way of disputation: yea, they are a contentious people. He was no more than a servant: We granted Our favour to him, and We made him an example to the Children of Israel". [43:57–59].**

Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) told them the story of Jesus, son of Mary (a.s.); how God had bestowed grace on him and granted him the power of performing miracles; the story was told in an Islamic context, i.e. Jesus (a.s.) was a servant of God and His messenger. Yet, they shied away from this assertion, preferring to talk about him in a distorted manner, i.e. the Christian contention that he is the Lord. Thus, they raised the question about the preference between him and what they worshipped, because both the notions led to the opposite of what Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) called for, i.e. worshipping the One and Only God. How could he then embrace it and reject what they believed in?

The Holy Qur'an takes issue with them on that contention, by confirming that they did not take the right road to dialogue. It revolves around discussing the notion from the perspective of the details its exponents provide, not through how others might conceive it, and whose

convictions might run contrary to it. This is liable to lead to failure in pinning them down. Rather, they tried to embark on the road of futile argument, which caused the wranglers to flee the position of right to another. It might make them raise doubt about the truth. In their bid to achieve this, they resorted to sophistry and the like. Had they desired to get to the truth, they would have kept an open mind as to perceiving the true picture, which would have led them to true belief, as has the Qur'an resolved the truth regarding Jesus (a.s.),

> **"He was no more than a servant on whom We bestowed favour, and We made him an example to the Children of Israel". [43:59].**

Rejecting this line of argument was not confined to the means espoused by the unbelievers. It had found its way to some of those who believed in the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his ministry. They were not up to the responsibility of dealing with issues of faith and battles of truth, in that they attempted to duck the issues by resorting to wrangling. This has come in the context of the Qur'anic narrative about the Muslims who were refusing to go with the Prophet (s.a.w.) to war, looking for excuses not to do so:

> **Just as thy Lord ordered thee out of thy house in truth, even though a party among the believers disliked it, disputing with thee concerning the truth after it was made manifest, as if they were being driven to death and they (actually) saw it. [8:5-6].**

The Holy Qur'an abound with stories about those arguing about God, the Qur'an, and the Prophetic mission. The Qur'an criticizes their corrupted stances because they steer the argument towards being subservient to falsehood and deny the clear truth, without proof, but with idle talk. The Qur'an explains that this is the work of Satan:

> **But the evil ones ever inspire their friends to contend with you if ye were to obey them, ye would indeed be Pagans. [6:121].**

In the same context, there are Qur'anic verses, which tell of types of debate that are directed towards serving treason and its perpetrators. This has been demonstrated by the story of a group of Muslims who tried to accuse some Jews of stealing, in an effort to divert the charge away from themselves. They mistakenly believed that their Jewishness was a sufficient cause for indicting them, regardless of the issue of right and wrong:

> **Contend not on behalf of such as betray their own souls; for God loveth not one given to perfidy and crime: They may hide (their**

**crimes) from men, but they cannot hide (them) from God, seeing that He is with them when they plot by night, in words that He cannot approve: And God Doth compass round all that they do. Ah! These are the sort of men on whose behalf ye may contend in this world; but who will contend with God on their behalf on the Day of Judgment, or who will carry their affairs through?" [4:107-109].**

## Islam and the legal profession

In the light of the preceding verses, you come to know about Islam's position on the legal profession, in which a lawyer could set out to defend the accused for material gain regardless. This is forbidden in Islam, unless the defence aims to restore the right of others, or extricate the innocent from the oppression that might have been exercised against them.

# The Islamic Basis of the Idea of Dialogue

## The value Islam attaches to reason

Islam's ideology starts from a sound basis in recognizing that intellect is a good power base from which to pass judgements on things and situations, and an arbiter between what is good and what is bad. Some Prophetic traditions (*hadith*) talked about the intellect, describing it as the messenger within, as opposed to the external one, i.e. the Prophet (s.a.w.). This is a proof of the great value Islam attaches to reason and the respect in which it holds it in for its role in doctrinal and *Sharia* legal matters.

In this light, Islamic theologians have considered intellectual judgements as a means to arriving at legal rulings in many instances, where the basis for Islamic legal legislation can be traced to reason *per se*. This is clearly manifested in what theologians describe – in the science of interpretation or arriving at legal judgements – as the four fundamentals, or tools, of (a) the Qur'an, (b) *Sunnah* (Prophetic tradition), (c) Reason, and (d) Consensus. They might, however, be talking about other ingredients, which we are not concerned with here.

## Rejection of emulation in questions of doctrine

On this basis, there is no escape from the fact that reason contributes dynamically and abundantly to human activity in many domains. It is inevitable that the religion, which respects reason, allows it to provide its share in discussing the tenets and conceptions of religion. Thus, Islam has made its starting point from the springboard of dialogue in two directions. Islamic activism is faced with two challenges. One is concerned with facing up to its adversaries. The other relates to how it conducts itself in life, by virtue of giving way to using rationalism, when rationalism, as a philosophical strand of thought, had not existed. Putting this approach into practice Islam has, at the outset, invited people to believe in its precepts on account of their own convictions through the evidence it presents them with, which proves that its way is the right one.

In so doing, Islam acknowledges that this is the right way to call people to embrace the faith, doing away with imitation when it comes to the core articles of faith, be they its own faith or other faiths. This is so, because emulating others in these doctrinal matters marks a departure from the sound way of thinking, perpetuating wrong and falsity, without any hope of putting them back on the right track, which would endanger life. On the other hand, any doctrine could not withstand time if it relies on apish-like followers, for the strength of emulation would only survive on account of the sacredness, in the minds of people, of its bygone times. If this sanctity is undermined or collapses, in any way, the whole structure comes tumbling down.

As for intellectual conviction, it is an ever-present power that draws on the strength of deep-rooted doctrine and sound intellect. Dialogue has a great part to play within this setting; it keeps chasing the idea with different moves and on more than one level. It would, thus, keep the faith alive and kicking on the way to achieving perfection. It is not a means of exercising mental agility that tames the idea aimlessly in an argument – like a game of pastime in which the frivolous can yield nothing and the victor can leave the vanquished speechless, yet without reaching satisfaction.

## The Islamic way

On the strength of evidence and a responsible attitude, Islam has set out on its journey in exploring the faith. The Holy Qur'an tells of the conclusive evidence, God has presented to His servants, of that which He wants them to believe in when it comes to questions of belief and unbelief:

> **Say: 'With God is the argument that reaches home: if it had been His will, He could indeed have guided you all'.** [6:149].

The Qur'an further reports its rejection of the believers' stand of weakness before others who try to whip up trouble for the faith and the faithful, thus:

> **...that there be no ground of dispute against you among the people...** [2:150].

In other verses the Qur'an narrates to us about the sending of messengers as harbingers and servers of warnings, so that they show people the right way, for God does not want to leave any leeway for any

person who has gone astray from the right path of doctrine and life:

> **[We sent] messengers who gave good news as well as warning, that mankind, after (the coming of the messengers), should have no plea against Allah: for Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise. [4:165].**

All these Qur'anic verses depict vividly the Islamic way, which makes as priority the proof for belief. There should not be belief without evidence and no accountability without the presence of evidence. The right conditions must be there in order to present the Divine evidence. This is with a view to inducing people into thinking and engaging in dialogue on their journey from doubt to faith, hence God's desire to give conclusive evidence. This being so, that they should not take issue with Him about its non-availability, should they deviate from the right path; nor should they have recourse against the believers when belief and unbelief do battle.

## Man's right of defence before God

Even on the Day of Judgement, man is not going to stand, before God, with hands shackled, as his fate is being determined. He will be given every opportunity to enter into dialogue and argument to defend himself in a fair trial, where God's Justice guarantees man's natural right to self-defence. That is, even before God, who knows everything, in that nothing, be it on earth or in heaven, would escape His knowledge. He knows what the eye would behold and what souls try to conceal:

> **[Remember] on the Day every soul will come up, pleading for itself, and every soul will be recompensed (fully) for all its actions, and none will be unjustly dealt with. [16:111].**

In summation, Islam wants man to be absolutely satisfied on the strength of the evidence presented to him, in a calm and well-informed debate on issues relating to doctrine and accountability; there should, for every question, be an answer, as the road to the right way is clearly signposted. From Islam's standpoint, dialogue is a fundamental base for calling others to believe in God and worship Him.

# *Chapter II*

# The Right Conditions for Dialogue

## Elements and Parameters of Dialogue

It goes without saying that there must exist the right climate for dialogue so that it becomes fruitful, instead of being a limited and barren exercise, both in form and content.

In the Holy Qur'an, God desired His Prophet (s.a.w.) to lay the right foundation for this climate by taking practical steps to formulate the necessary parameters. At the top of the agenda are the personalities of both the parties to dialogue, i.e. the initiator and his interlocutor, where the mentality that livens the progress of dialogue comes into play. That is, on the way of knowledge and eventually faith, and not barren wrangling.

A sincere effort should be made to create a calm atmosphere conducive to mind-provoking ideas. This is far removed from irritable influences that confuse the human mind and divert it from thinking straight and independently, and not a shadow of others. With this climate available to man, both parties would set out knowing the task ahead – clear in their minds as to the defined lines of the subject they want to engage in dialogue on. As a consequence, the way dialogue is approached would have a bearing on others being influenced by its outcome, in that it will make them closer to the notion that has been debated.

However, any dialogue should have five elements present:

1. The personality of the debater conducting the dialogue.
2. The personality of the second party to the dialogue.
3. The creation of a calm climate conducive to independent thinking.
4. Knowledge of the subject being debated.
5. The style of dialogue.

Here we are making a genuine effort to discuss in some detail these five elements, within the context of how the Qur'an has come to articulate their general as well as their special characteristics.

## The personality of the debater conducting the dialogue

Naturally, for any meaningful dialogue between two people to lead to a conclusive result, it should fulfil a fundamental condition. Each of the two parties must have intellectual freedom, which provides both with the confidence of independence rather than falling prey to psychological and intellectual terror. This might come about as a result of feeling inferior and thus helpless before the awesome power of the other party. It could result in the erosion of one party's self-confidence, which in turn would undermine their faith in their cause and capability to be a viable party to the dialogue. They would then lose their mental power, becoming an echo for the ideas being received from the other party.

In practice the Prophet (s.a.w.), carrying out God's instructions in the Holy Qur'an, made sure that this condition, i.e. guaranteeing intellectual freedom for the other party to dialogue, was fulfilled. On many occasions he used to reiterate that he was a human being like any other member of the human race, with no innate super powers. He was not in a position to perform miracles as was requested of him by some people then. He could not predict the unseen. The only difference was that he was revealed to by God as His messenger. His role was to deliver the message persuasively to the people in all ways possible. No compulsion was involved, since he did not have a magic wand to wave and make them believe in what he was inviting them to. As for the people, they were free to accept his invitation or turn it down. Should it be the former, he would have achieved what he set out to do; should it be the latter, his solace would be that he had conveyed the message on behalf of His Lord to the best of his ability:

> **Say: "I am but a man like yourselves, (but) the inspiration has come to me, that your God is one God: whoever expects to meet his Lord, let him work righteousness, and, in the worship of his Lord, admit no one as partner".** [18:110]

> **Say: "I have no power over any good or harm to myself except as God willeth. If I had knowledge of the unseen, I should have multiplied all good, and no evil should have touched me: I am but a warner, and a bringer of glad tidings to those who have faith".** [7:188]

## The personality of the second party to the dialogue

It is incumbent on the party who engages in dialogue to prepare for the battle ahead, in that he must be very well prepared inside and out to accept the results dialogue will yield. Otherwise, dialogue will turn into a

fruitless squabble intended for a show of strength and sophistry that will have no bearing on the subject being debated. If this turns out to be the case, it would suggest that the whole exercise was one that was prepared beforehand for personal and social reasons that had no connection with one's intellectual convictions; convictions that should be based on the strength of the evidence and argument.

The Holy Qur'an has highlighted this aspect and spoke of those who were unwilling to accept sound argument:

> **Of them there are some who (pretend to) listen to thee; but We have thrown veils on their hearts, So they understand it not, and deafness in their ears; if they saw every one of the Signs, not they will believe in them; in so much that when they come to thee, they (but) dispute with thee; the Unbelievers say: "These are nothing but tales of the ancients". Others they keep away from it, and themselves they keep away; but they only destroy their own souls, and they perceive it not.** [6:25-26]

> **As to those who reject Faith, it is the same to them whether thou warn them or do not warn them; they will not believe. God hath set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing, and on their eyes is a veil; great is the penalty they (incur).** [2:6-7]

These verses show a picture for those who can hear the call to faith, yet their hearts and minds are against discerning it. If the clear signs come from God, they turn their faces away as if not believing in them, not because they do not have answers to justify their rejecting them; rather, they want to reject them out of obstinate and entrenched positions. Thus the phrase they use in facing up to Islamic activists does not express any intellectual responsibility, i.e.: "These are nothing but tales of the ancients", with no proof to augment their argument.

Examples of those people can be found in this day and age. Many people – who harbour enmity to religions, and who have no knowledge with which they can face up to religious thought, in all its tenets and conceptions for life – have no weapon apart from churning out words like "superstitions" and "fables" to brand religion with. They sometimes resort to closing the door in the face of debate by suggesting that religion has passed its "sell-by" date, and that it has been substituted by science. Yet, they do not support this with clear proofs and conclusive evidence, since they are unable to do so.

The following verses depict this position vividly, as the extent of their haughtiness is all apparent insofar as their blind denial of the counter-argument is concerned:

> **They swear their strongest oaths by God, that if a (special) Sign came to them, by it they would believe. Say: "Certainly (all) Signs are in the power of God: but what will make you (Muslims) realize that (even) if (special) Signs came, they will not believe?" We (too) shall turn to (confusion) their hearts and their eyes, even as they refused to believe in this in the first instance: We shall leave them in their trespasses, to wander in distraction. Even if We did send unto them angels, and the dead did speak unto them, and We gathered together all things before their very eyes, they are not the ones to believe, unless it is in God's Plan. But most of them ignore (the truth).** [6:109-11]

Those people did not want to believe in God, calling on Mohammad (s.a.w.) to demonstrate some supernatural feats as a prerequisite for their embracing the faith. However, they knew that their request would not be entertained as bringing signs was not a game; rather, it was subservient to Divine wisdom, which would not cause anything to happen unless in a certain measure and in response to a necessity, which certain challenges mounted against the messengers in given circumstances would require.

Besides, for those who want to get to the truth, the question of belief is, in essence, not connected to performing miracles, in that it is there to be had anywhere and in each and every position Islam takes on life. Accordingly, there remains no room for manoeuvre except overweening and flimsy attempts to justify one's position from a shaky ground:

> **Even if We did send unto them angels, and the dead did speak unto them, and We gathered together all things before their very eyes, they are not the ones to believe, unless it is in God's Plan. But most of them ignore (the truth)"** [6:111].

It is, therefore, not a matter of calling for signs to be brought down, and the response to them, or otherwise; rather, it is the entrenched position of not being prepared to accept belief, regardless.

Here is another example of this type of people, who have no concern but sticking to their position come what may:

> **Say those without knowledge: "Why speaketh not God unto us? Or why cometh not unto us a Sign?" So said the people before them**

**words of similar import. Their hearts are alike. We have indeed made clear the Signs unto any people who hold firmly to Faith (in their hearts).** [2:118]

**Remember how they said: "O Allah if this is indeed the Truth from Thee, rain down on us a shower of stones from the sky, or send us a grievous penalty".** [8:32]

This is the approach of the naive, who try to experience belief by asking to see it, or by talking directly to it, or even by tasting its torture from a position of denial. An example of this is those who, in what they perceive as standing in defiance of God, show off and stretch their hands in the presence of others, saying: "If God exists, let Him break our hands!" They may even suggest to children to ask God to send them down water, food, or shoes, as a sign of His existence, or lack of it.

These are nothing, but simplistic, provocative, and deceptive methods, which aim to subject the issue of belief to provocation and challenge. These tactics are usually embarked on by a person who claims to be important and great; they thus surround themselves with an aura of magnificence that, they think, would make the issue of their belief, or unbelief, as having a great impact on real life. This is how the Qur'an has portrayed the picture of this type of people:

**Those who dispute about the signs of God without any authority bestowed on them – there is nothing in their breasts but (the quest of) greatness, which they shall never attain to: seek refuge, then, in God: It is He Who hears and sees (all things).** [40:56]

**Such as fear not the meeting with Us (for Judgment) say: "Why are not the angels sent down to us, or (why) do we not see our Lord?" Indeed they have an arrogant conceit of themselves, and mighty is the insolence of their impiety!** [25:21]

Contrary to that dim picture, which the Holy Qur'an has depicted for the pig-headed – who are adamant in not believing, regardless of the availability of conclusive evidence which could make them do so – a bright picture is presented for the brilliant person who is in search of the truth. This has been captured in the person of Prophet Abraham (a.s.) in dialogue on distinguishing between the truth and falsehood. He used to pose for himself the questions of falsehood, then started the process of soul-searching in order to attain the truth, which would land him in the realm of true belief through the shortest and strongest of routes. Imagine

the brilliant sight of a person, calm and collected, in a quest for the truth from a position of doubt. Thus he sets out by assuming the role of another party to the dialogue and beginning the process of reaching certitude through self-reasoning:

> **So also did We show Abraham the power and the laws of the heavens and the earth, that he might (with understanding) have certitude. When the night covered him over, He saw a star: He said: "This is my Lord". But when it set, He said: "I love not those that set". When he saw the moon rising in splendour, he said: "This is my Lord" But when the moon set, He said: "Unless my Lord guide me, I shall surely be among those who go astray". When he saw the sun rising in splendour, he said: "This is my Lord; this is the greatest (of all)". But when the sun set, he said:"O my people! I am indeed free from your (guilt) of giving partners to God. For me, I have set my face, firmly and truly, towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth, and never shall I give partners to God". [6:75-79]**

In the same way the simple and naive among Abraham's people started their journey in search of something to believe in, falling under the spell of cosmic phenomena as representing greatness and ambiguity. In the people's psyche, the worship of stars, the moon, and the sun was taken to in earnest. The different forms which their worship took followed the different forms that those stars and planets took, in that the gods, as we understand it, progressed from the smallest to the biggest. At first, this progressive approach was reflected in Abraham's way of thinking, being one of them. He settled for taking the sun for god, for it is greater than the moon; thus, it was worthier of worship, by virtue of its having more features of worship than the rest of the stars and planets.

His changing frame of mind was coloured by the superiority or inferiority – as the case maybe – of this object or the other. Yet, whenever a certain star or planet set after rising, where there was a case for weakness and disappearance from the sky – it rendered each of them unworthy of being the Lord; the Lord that has created the universe and managed it, which makes Him possess an almighty power and omnipresence. As such, Abraham (a.s.) manages to replace this fleeting transient belief with an absolute belief in the Creator of the heavens and the earth, whose presence is demonstrated in the manifestations of what He created. In addition, what makes this belief take root is the feeling of continuity of the presence, as manifested by the continuous activity of the

universe in its order and permanence. This has been a vivid picture of a person who experiences the concerns of knowledge in order to attain the certitude of belief. Thus, they follow the steps of knowledge in a conscientious spirit and open mind, always submissive to the truth in all the proofs and evidence it provides.

The Holy Qur'an presents us with another situation where Prophet Abraham (a.s.) is portrayed as a human being who, because of his nature, has a burning desire for belief, yet wants to cross over to another plateau, that of spiritual peace of mind; so he sets out in search of that which could provide that much sought-after serenity of heart and mind:

> **Behold! Abraham said: "My Lord! Show me how Thou givest life to the dead" He said: "Dost thou not then believe?" He said: "Yea! But to satisfy my own undertaking". He said: "Take four birds; Tame them to turn to thee; put a portion of them on every hill and call to them: They will come to thee (flying) with speed. Then know that God is Exalted in Power, Wise".** [2:260]

In as much as he believed in God's Omnipotence, a belief stemming from a sound mind and keen and observant eye, he wanted to cement that with the power of tangible results because they can harness the heart to the mind, and the intellect to the sight. His was not a request made out of defiance; far from it, it was a prayer and an entreaty he was driven to by a sense of need and responsibility within his unbelieving society, whose equilibrium was shaken to the roots by a multiplicity of trends that were going astray.

From these two sides of the personality of Abraham (a.s.), in his dynamic dialogue on the road to belief, one can figure out the religious aspect of the other party to dialogue; the party who wants to get to the truth, sparing no effort to achieve that goal, not getting distracted or thwarted by anything.

### The creation of a calm climate for independent reasoning

Perhaps the utmost requirement for going the entire distance in achieving the objective of dialogue is the presence of the right environment that is conducive to man's being himself, away from tense situations that form barriers to his need for contemplation. There is always the danger that any person might fall victim to the general pattern of thinking prevailing in their social climate, which might give way to overzealous following of some ideas or concepts, or rejecting others.

Thus, they might unconsciously and without much thought follow the same pattern, as a natural consequence of their having been in the same melting-pot. This is bound to deny the individual his intellectual independence and distinct character, and turn him into a mere shadow of himself.

The Holy Qur'an has conveyed to us the style of dialogue Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) used with his arch-opponents, especially when they accused him of insanity. The message was clear and loud:

> **Do not be part of any environment that is susceptible to inciting the feelings, should you contemplate embracing an idea or rejecting it, and condoning a position or keeping away from it: Say: "I do admonish you on one point: that ye do stand up before God, – (It may be) in pairs, or (it may be) singly, – and reflect (within yourselves): your Companion is not possessed: he is no less than a warner to you, in face of a terrible penalty". [34:46]**

Thus, the Divine revelation attributed the charge that the Prophet (s.a.w.) was mad to the whipped-up climate that characterized the enmity-ridden camp of his adversaries. They were bereft of any criterion by which they could delineate good things from bad ones; their ideas were a reflection of those of others. That is why it called on them to disperse in smaller groups or individually in intellectual discussion, which might restore their individual reasoning faculties, so that they might make their own minds up decisively in the shortest of times. This was so, because calm intellectual activity would give them the opportunity to ponder the character of Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.), his ideas and the precepts of his message. The result aspired to could put all this in perspective, leading them to rescind the charge of insanity, lock, stock, and barrel. A natural conclusion would then follow, i.e. recognition that he was the Messenger of God to the people to caution them against an impending severe punishment.

Similar circumstances where frenzy has ruled supreme, can be found in all the places where Islam is engaged in a bitter struggle against the enemies of God, be they atheist or other adversaries, on issues of faith or *Sharia* law. Accusations are thrown left, right, and centre, all in a bid to distract those who call members of society to the way of God by way of pristine Islamic ideology. This is perceived as running against the realities of deviation and unbelief that are rife in certain communities. Thus, the enemies of God spare no effort in waging well-organized campaigns of

vilification against the true believers. In the context of ideological and social advancement, they are dubbed reactionaries. They might as well be accused of being unpatriotic. On a political liberation level, they might be accused of collaborating with colonial powers.

The war against Islam appears to have no bounds; some quarters appear to exploit the alienation of society, having become far removed from Islamic teachings and spirit. The fact that Islam has become hostage to foreign laws and norms has compounded this and given these quarters the opportunity to instigate people to attack what Islam stands for. An example of this is the attempt to portray the Islamic penal code – the penalty of amputating the hand of a thief, for instance – as being barbarous, not in line with the laws of modern times, which, they contend, deal with the crime of stealing in a scientific way on the basis of psychology and sociology, without violence and harshness. They appear to make such charges without due regard to the fact that practical experiments of this type of punishment have proved successful in eliminating thieving in some contemporary societies; on the other side of the spectrum, the many scientific approaches to lessen the scourge of stealing in the most advanced nations failed to reap any tangible results.

In order to discredit Islamic *Sharia* law, they further maintain that amputating the hand of a thief would create a group of people who would live like parasites in society, on account of not being able to work due to the disability they have been left with. In their tirade they seem to ignore the fundamental aspects of the legislation in counting the profit and loss in the life of society. In so doing, they aim at stirring up hostile feelings against Islam; a charged atmosphere that would not leave any room for Islamic activists to engage with their adversaries in a meaningful debate.

Another front has been opened in the war against Islam. It is that of women and their rights – the hijab (veil), polygamy, matrimonial law, especially divorce, and other issues – which may have some negative effects on some societies that have been raised on deviant concepts and misguided opinions. This is found in Western societies, which deal with divorce and polygamy from a Christian standpoint that is the hallmark of Western ideology. It is no wonder, therefore, that some Muslim rulers have caved in to the onslaught from Western legislators and sociologists, by passing laws that contravene the Law of God Almighty, with little, or no, regard for its positive aspects. They take this position for fear of

being accused of a reactionary attitude; this is done without paying attention to the reasons behind the campaign of vilifying Islamic Sharia law, which has aimed to take the interests of the human race as a whole, without playing on sentiments that are not capable of lending support to any law.

This frenzied attack on Islam has been reflected in the bitter struggle which Muslims face to instil firmly, in life, independent Islamic economic concepts, doing away with both capitalist ideology and materialistic socialist philosophy.

An example one witnesses on this front is the unjust accusation that Islam denies the rights of the working class by siding with exploitative and monopolistic classes, because of Islam's stand on individual property and its protection against infringement. That is done without any attempt on the part of the accusers to see for themselves Islam's genuine effort to protect society from the excesses, should there be any, of the said property magnates, through its legal system.

Islamic activists face all these accusations in an emotionally charged atmosphere. This is a deliberate strategy in order to push the masses into a position where debate is impossible, so that they cannot think independently because of their generally stressed mental state.

In such a situation, Islamic activists should do their level best to steer the dialogue away from such an environment, where enmity to Islam is a foregone conclusion, to a calmer climate, where they can see for themselves the side of the argument afresh. There and then the journey of dialogue could make a fresh start from the threshold of the intellect, rather than at the end of one's tether.

In their effort to create the ideal climate for well-informed debate, Islamic activists should not lose sight of certain situations where both parties to dialogue might be influenced by a deep-rooted sense of respect for the idea they believe in and defend. In the main, this feeling of affinity is based on emotions rather than cool-headedness, which makes it difficult for those concerned to let go easily under any ideological or social pressure.

A vivid example of this attitude is the position of a person vis-ä-vis the traditions and beliefs of their forefathers, in that the degree with which they uphold these traditions and beliefs is tied to the level at which they venerate those forefathers. Thus, there appears to be no room for

admitting that they might be wrong, for fear of condemning the forefathers and tarnishing their image, let alone viewing any change of course as a betrayal of their memory. These are matters of the heart, not the mind.

The Prophet (s.a.w.) had faced this situation with his own tribe, the Arabs at large, and other nations. This was when he faced them with the Islamic faith and law, which was at loggerheads with the beliefs and tribal norms they inherited from their fathers and ancestors. The result was that they defied him and what he stood for because he wanted them to mend their ways, i.e. to move away from the misguided beliefs of their ancestors to the guidance of God and His messenger. What was striking was that they did not have any proof or evidence of the "soundness" of their beliefs, apart from their being the beliefs of their fathers and forefathers, which, to their mind, used to constitute the will of God in everything, hence the connection between sentimental sanctity and the Divine will in their perception of things.

Since this was the case, Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) doubled his effort, first, to discuss with them the ideological approach, before reasoning with them on the nature of the idea and its details. This was an attempt to make them aware of the perennial truth they appeared to have forgotten, in that ideological matters have no bearing on personal ones; each has its own domain, fundamentals, and branches. Ideological issues emanate from the human intellect, and are not subject to any influences, be they emotional or external. To embark on the road of either belief or unbelief, man has to explore the issue in its natural setting, through the inward and outward traffic of influences. Had it not been for this, the Prophet (s.a.w.) would have not reached a clear-cut result with them, because, given their entrenched position on the sacredness of the past, they were not prepared even to debate the issue let alone allow him to attempt to win them over.

The style of submitting the idea and discussing the approach outlined in the following verses puts the matter in perspective:

> **When it is said to them: "Follow what God hath revealed:" They say: "Nay! We shall follow the ways of our fathers". What! Even though their fathers were void of wisdom and guidance?** [2:170)
>
> **They said: "It is the same to us whether thou admonish us or be not among (our) admonishers! This is no other than a customary device of**

**the ancients, and we are not the ones to receive Pains and Penalties!"** [26:136–38]

**Nay! They say: "We found our fathers following a certain religion, and we do guide ourselves by their footsteps". Just in the same way, whenever We sent a Warner before thee to any people, the wealthy ones among them said: "We found our fathers following a certain religion, and we will certainly follow in their footsteps". He said: "What! Even if I brought you better guidance than that which ye found your fathers following?" They said: "For us, we deny that ye (prophets) are sent (on a mission at all)".** [43:22–24]

One can detect an attitude of obstinate rejection of the Divine message because it contradicted what their fathers were following. The Qur'anic approach, in rejecting their argument, was questioning the intellectual capabilities of their fathers. It further invited them to engage in a process of weighing what they inherited against what the Divine revelation was calling for. It was possible that they might have seen the strength of the argument put across by the said revelation and its superiority over their heritage.

Thus, we believe that Islamic activists must be aware of this aspect when they are faced with a similar situation. They must spare no effort to move themselves from the climate of inviolability that they attach to their heritage to a more natural one, by casting doubt over what they hold sacrosanct and by dispelling the aura that they cast around their fathers. It should be stressed to them that holding the fathers in high regard should not mean that they are not prone to making mistakes, i.e. they were not infallible in what they believed in or acted upon.

What we are faced with in this climate is not confined to treating heritage as sacred. We may come across the kind of people who would refuse to debate the counter-argument out of partisan following, as many parties instil in the minds of their members the idea of sticking doggedly with the ideology of the party, regardless of the fact that, if debated, it might be proved wrong. The same could be said of people who pay allegiance to a particular leader, a social icon, or an intellectual of merit.

The right and practical approach must, therefore, be centred on the discussion, by the parties to the dialogue, of the way by which they would break free from the shackles of traditional attachment to what they perceive as inviolable. This would ensure a good start, in that the

interlocutors would be at ease with themselves and capable of engaging in the dialogue with free will, should they be looking forward to a good conclusion to it. The Holy Qur'an made it abundantly clear to the Prophet (s.a.w.) that he should make available the natural climate for dialogue. This is capable of taking the debate to its required goal with neither negative aftershocks, nor a flare-up of emotions. The route to belief would then be sown with pleasant surprises, not a bad-tempered exercise resulting in acrimony, hatred, and enmity.

## Knowledge of the subject of dialogue

Parties to the dialogue must have knowledge about the subject they are about to prove or refute, for ignorance of the subject matter would turn the debate into a squabble, where each party would endeavour to cover up their weaknesses, for example, in not standing firm in defence of one's side of the argument. Conversely, knowledge about the issue being debated would provide each party with the ammunition necessary for an exchange of views from the start to the finish, with clarity of purpose, serenity of mind, strength of proof, and sweetness of narrative.

The Holy Qur'an has reported on some people, who stood against the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his mission out of ignorance *per se*:

> **Ah! Ye are those who fell to disputing (Even) in matters of which ye had some knowledge! but why dispute ye in matters of which ye have no knowledge? It is God Who knows, and ye who know not!** [3:66]
>
> **Those who dispute about the signs of God without any authority bestowed on them, there is nothing in their breasts but (the quest of) greatness, which they shall never attain to: seek refuge, then, in God: It is He Who hears and sees (all things).** [40:56]
>
> **Nay, they charge with falsehood that whose knowledge they cannot compass, even before the elucidation thereof hath reached them: thus did those before them make charges of falsehood: but see what was the end of those who did wrong!** [10:39]

We can understand from these verses that the Holy Qur'an is criticizing all those who dispute Divine revelations and the sending of prophets, as having entered the fray of debate without the right tools, for they are bereft of any knowledge on, and proof of, the matter they are rejecting. This is bound to prove that their disputations and denial are based on a whim, induced by a psychological complex, in that they resort

to idle talk and evasiveness, let alone disbelief. Such an approach would lead dialogue nowhere, at the expense of knowledge and the truth.

A hint of this can be traced in the struggle taken up by Islam against its opponents; there is many a person who chooses to dispute one issue or the other without having the slightest idea about even the nature of the question they are defending or rejecting. This applies to some quarters that talk in the name of Islam as much as it applies to its adversaries. They know very little about their own argument, let alone the counter view, which is shrouded in their minds with ambiguity. They may, however, be equipped with some knowledge, so limited in its content and application that they are ignorant of its relation to the remaining parts that form the whole jigsaw. Thus, they do disservice to the issue when they concentrate on a particular part and not the rest, as this would render it lacking in substance that could give it strength and vibrancy.

It is natural, therefore, that we reach an inconclusive result from dialogue that could, at times, leave the defenders of Islam in an unenviable situation. This, though, does not come about as a result of a weakness of the case; rather, they are lacking in knowledge about it. Muslim activists could drop their guard, basking in the sense that their case is strong, and consequently lose an argument that may be weak. This could be the tip of the iceberg, as being lulled into a false sense of security could result in disastrous consequences, in that they could lose the will to do battle with the real forces of falsehood and unbelief, which are represented by high calibre intellectuals. And, thus, they will be caught unawares. In certain circumstances, this could lead to an intellectual defeat that can adversely affect the progress of Islamic activism in life.

We are, therefore, of the opinion that Muslim activists should keep abreast of Islamic educational and cultural movements. This can make them stand on a solid ground when engaging in debate with their opponents, [arguing] from a position of strength rather than exploiting the weakness of the adversary. On the other hand they must also keep pace with counter-culture, especially where they think it supports their side of the argument. This can guide their steps through the process of weighing things up and making preferences regarding the concepts or statements of belief being debated to a conclusive result; a result that can be influenced by the strength or weakness of the opponent, according to their style of debate, knowledge, and evidence.

## Style of dialogue

From Qur'anic reports, Islam has concluded that there are two ways to intellectual debate or struggle.

There is the callous or violent style, which espouses the notion of attacking the opponent with the harshest language and methods, choosing to use all that contributes to hurting their feelings and degrading their integrity. Thus, there is no respect for their sentiments, no consideration for their standard of living, and no care for their circumstances; rather, it appears as though they are waging an all-out onslaught. It goes without saying that this approach can yield nothing but more grudge, hatred and animosity, and a departure from the climate that is conducive to bringing opinions closer and drawing the struggle to a satisfactory conclusion.

The other way of intellectual debate is that of non-violence, or the peaceful way, which champions leniency and love as a means of settling disputes and differences. This way stems from the Islamic principle that recognizes that the issue of struggle, in all its forms, is a dynamic and open means to achieving the goal, i.e. embracing the truth and abiding by it, and galvanizing public opinion to side with this goal and identify with it. It is, therefore, necessary for this method of debate to have in its armoury all that is pleasant and good, i.e. that which opens the hearts and minds up to the truth and brings opinions closer to Islam's way of thinking and its injunctions, away from what is evil and negative.

Islam calls for espousing this way in all approaches to dialogue and disputation, with a view to gaining knowledge, on the one hand, and getting to the truth, on the other. Islam dubbed this way **"That which is best"**. It is, therefore, the hallmark of all methods of dialogue:

> **Who is better in speech than one who calls (men) to God, works righteousness, and says, "I am of those who bow in Islam?" Nor can goodness and Evil be equal. Repel (Evil) with what is better: Then will he between whom and thee was hatred become as it were thy friend and intimate! And no one will be granted such goodness except those who exercise patience and self-restraint, none but persons of the greatest good fortune.** [41:33–35]

It is abundantly clear that "doing good" stands for the peaceful way, whereas "evil" symbolizes the violent way.

It is further clarified that when the Holy Qur'an recommends the use

of non-violent means, it is confident as to the good results that will be reaped by using these methods, in that you turn your enemies into friends, joining in with you in what you are thinking of and what you want to do. The Qur'an is, however, aware that treading this path is not easy; it requires resilience and strong faith because it could test one's nerves in situations that require rising to the challenge and facing up to the problems of struggle.

This has been discussed in two more verses concerning the call to God's way and direct dialogue:

> **Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance.** [16:125]
>
> **And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury): but say, "We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our God and your God is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam)".** [29:46]

Engaging in debate with others using the best approach can win the other party over to your side of the argument. In using this approach Muslim activists should remain alert throughout to the changing mode of the dialogue in order to choose the approach which best suits any given stage of its progress. This is applicable to communicative skills as well as to the meanings one is trying to put across.

An example of this approach is what the last verse talked about, of debating with the People of the Book, i.e. none but by what is the best. The verse set out to explore the common ground between them and us, i.e. between what we believe in and what they believe in. The great importance of Islam is that it starts from a shared belief in all God's revelations and His messengers, in that all of us worship Him and submit to Him. Thus, the dialogue starts from a shared base, which may serve as a springboard to further possible meeting of minds on other issues, after agreement has been achieved on fundamental ones.

## Doubt on the Way to Certitude

The Prophet's approach to conducting dialogue with his opponents demonstrated the dynamism and flexibility of the Islamic approach. The progress of his mission on the ground was characterized in its main, as well as specific, features by these qualities. He was the one who created the right climate for dialogue and its management, calling for people to embrace Islam according to that framework.

As exemplified by the way the Prophet (s.a.w.) conducted himself, we become aware of two practical approaches in the movement of Islamic activism.

[The first approach] focuses on doing away with preconceived ideas which could turn the situation into a complex one that extends its shadow to all domains of dialogue. [Preconceptions] constitute a barrier to feeling free as to what to accept and what to reject. This way ensures that both parties of the debate can make a start by accepting that doubt could be lingering in the idea being deliberated. What follows is that both parties can explore the idea afresh, as though they have not discussed it before. There should not be any pre-judgements regarding the question in hand from either party, i.e. whether true or false; rather, a mutual recognition by both sides that they want to arrive at the truth through honest and well-informed debate, on the path to reaching agreement, as has been demonstrated in this Qur'anic verse: **"And certain it is that either we or ye are on right guidance or in manifest error!"** [34:24].

As is evident, in adopting this approach, the Prophet (s.a.w.) did not portray himself as being in the right, nor did he brand his adversary as being in the wrong, although in his mind he was pretty sure that this was the case. He was aware that he should give leeway for the issue to be explored in an atmosphere of freedom, so that it could reach its required destination from a base of intellectual freedom in a dialogue that was on the right track.

The second approach the Prophet (s.a.w.) adopted to conduct a fruitful dialogue, was to face up to the opponent with the full force of his convictions, based on the strength of evidence and clarity of proof, on the one hand, and the manifest error of the opponent's persuasion, on the

other. Yet he left the opponent in no doubt that the convictions were not impregnable, in which case all doors were open to a mutual exchange of views, should their proponents feel that they had something new to debate. This could have a bearing on the end result, as they could, perchance, win the day in proving their way was far superior and rightly guided. This approach is able to make the situation tension-free, i.e. from being highly charged with bigotry and zealotry, which could lead to keeping the subject [stuck] on its track, thus preventing it from being debated properly and afresh. This freedom of going back to debate the issues afresh lends clarity to the position of faith, in that it can mount a challenge and, at the same time, accept counter-challenges whenever the need may arise: **"Say: 'Then bring ye a Book from God, which is a better guide than either of them, that I may follow it! (Do), if ye are truthful!'"** [28:49].

Thus, the crux of the matter is that there is a clear way that should be followed on the road to belief. Our faith in this way is based on the conviction that it is the right way, and that any other way is one of deviation. Should you have a better way, or a much clearer book, then lead us to it, because we do not suffer from any superiority complex; we always keep an open mind.

Both the approaches meet at the point of giving all freedom to the conduct of a dialogue. The first approach starts the dialogue anew, and from a point of sowing doubt on the way to certitude, shrugging off all previously held persuasions. The second approach sticks with the convictions but, through the dynamism required to debate the counter-arguments, gives them the opportunity of acceptance on new plausible grounds.

As Islamic activists, we should feel the need for both these approaches in order to be able to overcome all the intellectual and psychological barriers which the adversaries of the call to God's way try to install against it. Such barriers take different shapes and guises, including the unjust accusations fabricated against Islam, which emanate from bigotry, zealotry, and rigidity, and which prevent us from engaging our opponents in dialogue.

We may also feel the need for such an approach through a sense of necessity to overrun the entrenched positions of opponents, who prevent their followers from entering into a dialogue with us that might lead them to embrace belief in God. This approach may prove fruitful in forcing

those people to raise doubt in their own creed on account of inviting them to explore the possibility of proving right or wrong our and their faiths.

Another approach could be to suggest to your opponent that you do not mind standing by their side, towing their line of belief, if they could convince you that their creed is far superior to yours, and that it is on a clearer path. Thus, you entice them into engaging in dialogue with you in the hope that they might win you over to their side of the argument. In so doing, you would succeed in smashing the barrier which prevents them from getting along with you in this regard.

## Wrangling by Falsehood

Having discussed the fundamental principles that could create the most suitable environment to start the process of dialogue from a solid ground, we may face a decisive question on this front:

Is it possible that we can engage in debate against the background of what we believe is false, or from viewpoints we do not share, because it could be an approach that might break the ice and mollify the opponent, thus forcing him to abandon his entrenched position?

Is conducting an argument that is based on falsehood permissible, if it proved rewarding in the process of dialogue?

The Holy Qur'an discusses this issue in this verse, where His condemnation is all-apparent:

> **We only send the apostles to give Glad Tidings and to give warnings: But the unbelievers dispute with vain argument, in order therewith to weaken the truth, and they treat My Signs as a jest, as also the fact that they are warned! [18:56].**

In another verse, it tells us of the People of the Book, thus:

> **There is among them a section who distort the Book with their tongues: (As they read) you would think it is a part of the Book, but it is no part of the Book; and they say, 'That is from God', but it is not from God: It is they who tell a lie against God, and (well) they know it! [3:78].**

Condemning those people for the falsehood they espouse is analogous to the idea that invites the faithful to reject falsehood outright in any situation they might be in. Let it be a struggle with the truth in order to undermine it, or in the context of battling with falsehood, in a bid to weaken it, by inventing a similar falsehood beside it. In both the examples, there is a case for perpetuating falsehood and lending it legitimacy, irrespective of the end result, be it in favour of the truth or falsehood.

This is elaborated further in this tradition from Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.), ***"Do not confuse the truth with falsehood; a meagre measure of the truth is more sufficient that an abundant measure of falsehood"***.

On the difference between reasoning with people by that which is best and wrangling with them by that which is not the best, he was quoted as saying:

> ***As for wrangling by that which is not the best, it is as though you were disputing with a liar who would present you with idle talk you are not in a position to refute with a divine proof; then you do not want to recognize it, or reject a truth the liar has set out to use in support of his falsehood; then you find no way but to repudiate that truth, for fear of recognizing that he has proved his case. This is forbidden to our followers, i.e. being the source of intrigue or trial to those who are deemed weak of their brethren as well as the liars. As for the liars, when they set out on debate, they would exploit the weakness of the weak among you, and the flimsiness of their proof, as evidence on the "strength" of their false argument. Concerning the weak among you, they would feel sad for the sight of the weakness of the truth before falsehood.***[1]

However, we could be in a position to understand the issue more fully if we came to know a fundamental truth, in that the situation is not that of struggle or competition between two groups vying to inflict defeat on each other. In the process, they try to use all the tools at their disposal to achieve the final goal, victory. Rather, the contest is between the truth and falsehood, with a view to siding with the truth, in all its domains, against falsehood, in all its guises and positions. Accordingly, conceding to any falsehood anywhere is tantamount to betrayal in the struggle between the truth and falsehood. We are all for the truth, even if it is found within the domain of our opponent, as much as we are against falsehood that may be found lingering in our life at times of digression from the right path.

Should the objective of dabbling in falsehood in the fields of struggle and dialogue be lending support to the position of the truth by way of proof and evidence, we reject that from the standpoint that it constitutes a low on the side of the truth. This is because the truth has a great power that is capable of mounting a viable challenge and standing up to the same, as is evident from the saying of Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq, ***"a meagre amount of truth is more sufficient that an abundant amount of falsehood"***.

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[1]From Biharul Anwar, vol. 9, p. 309.

It is worth noting, though, that this could adversely affect the position of the truth within its camp or within the opponents' camp. Yet, recognizing that your opponent is in the right should not necessarily render your side weak. On the contrary, it could be a means to enhancing your position, for by acknowledging the right your opponent advocates, you would be able to defeat the main thrust of the falsehood he espouses and defends, provided that you know how to use it, alongside other means, to your advantage.

This state of affairs is clearly depicted in the following Qur'anic verse where liars attempted to conceal the truth regarding the signs of the prophecy of Mohammad (s.a.w.), which the Jews happened to be familiar with, for fear of using it to counter their argument: **"Behold! When they meet the men of Faith, they say: 'We believe'. But when they meet each other in private, they say: 'Shall you tell them what God hath revealed to you, that they may engage you in argument about it before your Lord?' Do ye not understand (their aim)?"** [2:76]. This is so in situations where you want to leave the position of falsehood unanswered. However, if it is a case for simulating recognition for falsehood in order to force the other party to recognize that they are in the wrong, this is a clever way of exposing falsehood from within its camp.

The Qur'anic verses that tell us of the dialogue of Prophet Abraham (a.s.) with his folk on their idol worship discuss this aspect. He resorted to destroying all their idols, except the big one, as a means to perfecting the debate in practice:

> **We bestowed aforetime on Abraham his rectitude of conduct, and well were We acquainted with him. Behold! He said to his father and his people, "What are these images, to which ye are (so assiduously) devoted?" They said, "We found our fathers worshipping them". He said, "Indeed ye have been in manifest error – ye and your fathers". They said, "Have you brought us the Truth, or are you one of those who jest?" He said, "Nay, your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, He Who created them (from nothing): and I am a witness to this (Truth). And by God, I have a plan for your idols – after ye go away and turn your backs". So, he broke them to pieces, (all) but the biggest of them, that they might turn (and address themselves) to it. They said, "Who has done this to our gods? He must indeed be some man of impiety!" They said, "We heard a youth talk of them: He is called Abraham". They said, "Then bring him before the eyes of the**

**people, that they may bear witness". They said, "Art thou the one that did this with our gods, O Abraham?" He said: "Nay, this was done by – this is their biggest one! ask them, if they can speak intelligently!" So they turned to themselves and said, "Surely ye are the ones in the wrong!" Then were they confounded with shame: (they said), "Thou knowest full well that these (idols) do not speak!" (Abraham) said, "Do ye then worship, besides God, things that can neither be of any good to you nor do you harm? Fie upon you, and upon the things that ye worship besides God! Have ye no sense?"** [21:51–67]

It is clear that Abraham (a.s.) attributed the responsibility of destroying the smaller idols to the big one, which was not true. He did not resort to this to deny his responsibility for the act. Far from it; it was a tactic to score a point against the idol worshippers and make them acknowledge the error of their worship, without realizing the shallowness of their argument. The plan paid off. Charging the big idol with breaking up the other idols, coupled with the idol worshippers' reply that this was impossible – because they could not speak for themselves – was a means of outflanking them anew: **"Do ye then worship, besides God, things that can neither be of any good to you nor do you harm? Fie upon you, and upon the things that ye worship besides God! Have ye no sense?"**

We have nothing against wearing a semblance of conceding to falsehood if it contributes to uncovering falsehood lock, stock, and barrel, although we know full well that it does not amount to giving in to falsehood anyway.

In summation, should the objective of dialogue be getting to the truth, it is obvious that the truth must be the ideology that should rule supreme throughout, i.e. the means and end. Giving way to falsehood to enter the fray is bound to denude the truth from its qualities, purity and eventually its strength, which gives us the feeling that it stands tall and high in the battlefield. Thus, we reject wrangling, which aims at staying clear of the path of truth, as it espouses trifling with facts in an attempt to hide the weakness of the debater in the face of the strong position of the anti-falsehood camp.

# *Chapter III*

## Progress of Dialogue on the Fundamentals of Islamic Faith

While Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) was going about propagating his message in calling to the way of God, Islam was facing many challenges that were mounted by the unbelievers. They were invited to change their concepts of the universe and life on account of a new way of thinking and practice espoused by Islam. This, of course, was contrary to the beliefs and practices they were holding.

Among the objectives Islam had set out to achieve was a complete plan for change: a new approach to tackling the issues head-on. Islam had resolved that the value of any project for change did not lie in the opinions it expressed; rather, by what it achieved on the front of change in the real world.

The Holy Qur'an has wanted to win people over, be they from the past or of this day and age, to the rational, or inductive, way of thinking in exploring an idea or a given situation in all its shapes and facets, on the way to gaining knowledge about it.

This method could employ certain approaches in order to hammer home the idea, by giving examples or through sensual images to awaken man's innate perceptive capacity by stimulating his cognitive powers. This is because human instincts could be dulled by external factors; and the only way to rouse them is by bringing them back to the real world where the idea is symbolized by an image that can be visually perceived and felt.

This is the approach the Holy Qur'an has set out to introduce, i.e. the espousal of change by changing the method used to gain knowledge about an idea and to get to terms with it. In so doing, man would be put face to face with the faith as it springs from its ideological base, and not by jumping on a bandwagon. It is an approach that is both flexible and multi-dimensional; one that is governed by the intellect, the heart and the instincts, as the case maybe. It is an approach that opens the way for man to use his mind, heart, and conscience to think, discuss matters, and have

a feeling about in any domain he wants to enter and any goal he wants to achieve. All of this is done in a climate of love and objectivity.

If you want to gag dialogue in order to close the door of faith to yourself and others, the door will be shut gently, in the hope that you might change your mind and reopen it.

Here, we are attempting to join in the movement of dialogue on the fundamentals of the faith, which has experienced all kinds of challenges, so that we can be clear about the features of the Islamic approach, both in theory and practice. We will make a few stops along the way. We will accompany Islam in its debut with the idol worshippers on theism and polytheism. Another stop will be with Islam's interactions with the unbelievers on belief and unbelief, the message and the messenger, and the Divine Book.

It should be stressed, though, that we are still discussing dialogue as involving the trading of ideas between two people, and also discussing it as the beginning of a conversation with others to encourage them to engage in new dialogue. The aim behind this is that we desire to know how dialogue should be conducted with others, on the one hand, and how we should initiate it, on the other. This is in the context of the progress of Islamic activism and jihad in hoisting high the banner of faith this world.

# Dialogue with the Polytheists

At the outset of the Islamic call to God's way, the Prophet (s.a.w.) faced the problem of people setting up partners to God. The problem manifested itself in the plethora of idols that were worshipped in accordance with a set of ceremonies and practices. Idol worshipping had permeated the entirety of people's life and psyche. It was so ingrained in their hearts and minds that they considered it to be an absolute truth and consequently they were dismissive of anything that might run contrary to that established belief, without any discussion or thought.

## Their psychological state

The following Qur'anic verses throw light on the psychological and mental state the polytheists were in when they were invited to worship the One and Only God:

> **"Has he made the gods (all) into one God? Truly this is a wonderful thing!" And the leaders among them go away (impatiently), (saying), "Walk ye away, and remain constant to your gods! For this is truly a thing designed (against you)! We never heard (the like) of this among the people of these latter days: this is nothing but a made-up tale!"** [38:5–7]

Thus, to their mind, the question was not one that was worthy of response or discussion; rather, it was a perplexing matter and nothing more. The discovery made them panic, when it required them to show steadfastness and forbearance, as a response to something they had never heard of in the former faith, only to conclude that it was nothing but lies.

## Theism and polytheism doing battle

In that situation, polytheism represented the greatest challenge to the progress of the prophetic mission, as it was the biggest hurdle preventing the message from getting across to the people. It was not a transient thing in their life, as it was a way of life and a social system. On the other hand, the Islamic message symbolized a great challenge to the polytheistic mentality, as it was the creed on whose rock polytheism would break up, as would all norms of conduct and customs based on it, even the inner

human feelings, which encapsulated man's relations with others and with God. This is called hidden polytheism; one of its aspects is akin to the conduct of a hypocrite who goes about his business apprehensive of others as well as of God.

The opening salvos of the battle began with full force. Following the Prophet's style of dialogue and management of struggle, Islam did not start the battle in the way they had expected it to be conducted. This was because the sphere within which the challenge of Islam's noble task was moving was different from the sphere in which polytheism was moving. In the former, the mission of Islam had started from the position of an ideology linked to the wider realities of universe and life. In the latter, polytheism had started from the position of a custom intertwined with the sentimentality of the heritage of fathers and forefathers, and from a base of concessions granted to the ruling elite.

It is obvious, therefore, that the difference in the nature of the challenge would leave its impact on the approach each camp used in the progress of struggle.

**Reason versus rage**

The methods used by the polytheists in managing struggle had been characterized by tensions that left no room for meaningful intellectual exchanges of ideas. Thus they resorted to provocative tactics through swearing, insults, and manufacturing countless unjust accusations. They brought yet another tactic into play, i.e. that of whipping up public hysteria against the callers to theism. The result was that the practice of oppression and torture against them was commonplace. This, needless to say, has been the means to which tyrants, who are bereft of strong proof to present their adversaries with, turn. They make use of all the tools at their disposal to suppress resistance.

On the other side of the spectrum, Islam's mission had espoused the calm approach that was capable of winning the hearts and minds of the polytheists to the cause of monotheism both in thought and in practice. It had set out to gradually free their conscience from all aspects of polytheism in a well-thought-out plan that had catered for all eventualities. Some situations might have called for jolting the minds of the idol worshippers, with a view to rousing them into thinking about their beliefs. The need might have arisen for making the opponents poke fun at their own convictions, after they had discovered the weaknesses and drawbacks within it.

This was the method the Prophet of Islam put into practice, guided by the Qur'anic approach to dialogue. There was no other way he could have tried, for he was firm in the knowledge and confidence that his argument was stronger than that of his opponents. Thus he was aware that the outcome of the struggle would be the triumph of his beliefs. Yet, in his struggle, he was not in it for point scoring against his adversaries, as though he were in a competition. Rather, his objective was that they should move with him to a new-found common ground, having seen the strength of his argument. His approach was one that never lost sight of the goal ahead, although the journey might have been long and arduous. This might have been induced by the struggle between man and his inner urge for speed and haphazardness.

## Polytheism loses the argument

The start was made from a very well-established position. The idea that had governed the position was one that was armed with proof and evidence, as well as knowledge. The Prophet asked his adversaries to provide all those things, should they wish to support their position, in the same measure as he required it from himself with all that he was calling them to, i.e. belief and ideology. He used to mount the challenge from the point where he could expose their position, by questioning their convictions and asking for evidence to prove that they were right. His questions were not affirmative, i.e. those of someone who wanted to acquire knowledge about their beliefs. Rather, they were posed in a negative mode, with a view to dismissing the allegations of the other party as baseless. This is succinctly captured in the following Qur'anic verses:

> **Say: "Do ye see what it is ye invoke besides God? Show me what it is they have created on earth, or have they a share in the heavens? Bring me a Book (Revealed) before this, or any remnant of knowledge (ye may have), if ye are telling the truth!"** [46:4]
>
> **Those who give partners (to God) will say: "If God had wished, we should not have given partners to Him nor would our fathers; nor should we have had any taboos". So did their ancestors argue falsely, until they tasted of Our wrath. Say: "Have ye any (certain) knowledge? If so, produce it before us. Ye follow nothing but conjecture: ye do nothing but lie".** [6:148]

Thus, the Holy Qur'an introduces the issue from the perspective of

common truths, in that it challenges their intelligence [by saying]: If those whom you call upon besides God are gods, they should be capable of creation. Conversely, being gods does not make sense; where is that which they have created on the earth, or in heaven for that matter? Should the answer be in the affirmative, where would this leave the allegation? Should it be in the negative, where then is the evidence, i.e. be it a book or any piece of information, so that we can ponder it? In fact, they were helpless. In that situation, they had nothing to fall back on, except conjecture and telling lies, and both were shallow and boneless.

## Monotheism proves the inconceivability of polytheism

As the dialogue progressed, Islam's side of the argument began to gather momentum. This was achieved by rejecting the doubters' argument from an angle of rational thinking and logical inference. Thus, the debate had become uniform in both the situations in accordance with the two philosophical principles as regards "negation", in that the non-existence of proof on something means that there is no way it can be proved. And furnishing the proof for "nothingness" turns "negation" into rationalistic determinism. Employing this approach, Islam had demonstrated the inconceivability of polytheism as an abstract notion, regardless of its proponents and the nature of their justifications for holding such views. God says:

> **Or have they taken (for worship) gods from the earth who can raise (the dead)? If there were, in the heavens and the earth, other gods besides God, there would have been confusion in both! but glory to God, the Lord of the Throne: (High is He) above what they attribute to Him!** [21:21–22]
>
> **Say: "If there had been (other) gods with Him, as they say, behold, they would certainly have sought out a way to the Lord of the Throne!"** [17:42]
>
> **No son did God beget, nor is there any god along with Him: (if there were many gods), behold, each god would have taken away what he had created, and some would have lorded it over others! Glory to God! (He is free) from the (sort of) things they attribute to Him!** [23:91]

The multiplicity of gods, the subject of the first verse, should assume that each of them has absolute power, for this quality is the most supreme that the gods could possess. This lends support to the Qur'anic

assumption that each one of them could covet something the others desired, and there the conflict might erupt, in which case the orderly state of the universe might be put in harm's way. Reality points to the opposite, i.e. there is no disorder in the system of the universe. Consequently, we must reject the notion of the existence of more than one God.

The second verse takes issue with the exponents of the notion, using a different approach. The suggested existence of other gods, besides God, should assume that they are capable of competing with each other to reach Him, because sharing with the Lord should necessarily mean sharing His very characteristics. On top of these qualities is the attribute of absolute power, which would, as a consequence, give them the same capability to get to Him, do battle with and depose Him. This is not possible, as there is no trace of Him in the universe.

As for the third verse, it discusses the two angles taken up by the other two verses and adds to the assertions the idea of the divisibility of the universe by virtue of every god taking away what he created, without any leeway for letting other gods share it with him. This contention breaks up on the rock of reality, as we can see that the whole of the creation is governed by a single system, which is both uniform and faultless.

### From the perspective of scholastic theologians

As is customary, scholastic theologians wished to tackle these Qur'anic verses from a philosophical perspective. They came up with a philosophical argument they dubbed "unobjectionability". In his commentary on the first verse, the author of *Majma'ul Bayan fi Tafseeril Qur'an* [a Qur'anic exegesis], offers this interpretation in expanding on this argument:

> *Should there be another god, besides God Almighty, they would have been eternal; timelessness is the most sublime of all characteristics; sharing this attribute would engender correspondence. It would then follow that both of them must be powerful, cognizant, and alive; in his own right, each of them can covet that which goes contrary to the wish of the other god, i.e. of causing death or life, stirring up or calming down things, causing poverty or prosperity, and so forth. On this supposition, their [contradictory] desires could materialize; this is impossible. Yet, should their wishes not come true, this would detract from their being all-powerful. If the desire of one of them*

*would materialize to the exclusion of the other, the one who could not make things happen, without justification why it was not possible for him, would be branded powerless. Consequently, it is conceivable that there is no god but One God.*

*However, if it is said that they do not have objection to each other's will to be executed, in that they happen to be wanting the very thing, the answer would be that what we are trying to prove is the validity of unobjectionability, not its incidence. Thus, the validity of unobjectionability is a sufficient proof that it is inevitable that the power of one of them is limited; consequently, it is inconceivable that he is god.*[1]

We can see that it is possible that the three Qur'anic verses, especially the first one, could lend themselves to the interpretation of scholastic theologians. However, the Holy Qur'an attaches more weight to the proofs it wants to establish, including rational ones, to those that have a bearing on the idea, away from all jargon or philosophical manoeuvrings. Thus we can identify in this holy verse the recognition of a natural truth that is dictated by the issue of multiple power centres in any given field. This is akin to what we see in real life situations. When each power centre has absolute authority and independence, i.e. in thought, management, and movement, this leads to disagreements, then conflict, then disorder, then victory, and eventually to winner-takes-all.

Besides, the method espoused by this holy verse is in line with the tendency of providing the polytheists with answers to what they argue of their belief in the context of debate. This is done in order to prove a case for rejection, without satisfying oneself with the negative trend, i.e. non-existence of a proof to support the idea. Abiding by the negative side would not negate the possibility of the idea; rather, it would disprove the existence of proof that it happened, by virtue of the rational thought, "Non-existence of proof should not lead to the conclusion that something does not exist". So, should others be in need of a proof to prove something, you should be in need of a proof on non-existence.

## Polytheism in reality

A novel approach to conducting dialogue has been discussed in the

[1]Majma'ul Bayan fi Tafseeril Qur'an, vol. 7, pp. 43--44.

Holy Qur'an. It required Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) to adopt it in his dialogue with the polytheists. The method was that of relying on rational reasoning. For a start, he anchored his position on rejecting the supremacy of their gods by denuding them of the attribute of divinity, which signifies omnipotence, capability of creation, and eternity, etc. He then went further than that, by stripping their gods of all the qualities that might make people hold them in any regard. This was bound to set them in place for mockery of their worth, not in a realm of divinity. This is beautifully depicted in the narrative of these Qur'anic verses:

> **Do they indeed ascribe to Him as partners things that can create nothing, but are themselves created? No aid can they give them, nor can they aid themselves! If ye call them to guidance, they will not obey: For you it is the same whether ye call them or ye hold your peace! Verily those whom ye call upon besides God are servants like unto you: Call upon them, and let them listen to your prayer, if ye are (indeed) truthful! Have they feet to walk with? Or hands to lay hold with? Or eyes to see with? Or ears to hear with? Say: "Call your 'god-partners', scheme (your worst) against me, and give me no respite!"** [7:191–95]
>
> **Yet have they taken, besides him, gods that can create nothing but are themselves created; that have no control of hurt or good to themselves; nor can they control death nor life nor resurrection.** [25:3]

To start with, it had been concluded that they could neither create anything nor could they be eternal. They were even unable to desire, or ward off, things like life, death, and resurrection. They were senseless for want of any faculty. It is a vivid picture that can produce nothing but laughter and degradation; how, then, could such gods be elevated to the rank of being worshipped?

> **O men! Here is a parable set forth! listen to it! Those on whom, besides God, ye call, cannot create (even) a fly, if they all met together for the purpose! and if the fly should snatch away anything from them, they would have no power to release it from the fly. Feeble are those who petition and those whom they petition!** [22:73]

This verse brilliantly illustrates the deep feeling of utter incapacity before one of the smallest and most vulnerable of creatures, where the ingredient of derision blends with the notion of divinity of those gods, which the idolaters worshipped to the exclusion of God. Imagine the two

sights. The first one is that of the gods trying to collaborate to create a fly, yet they cannot despite the power they deployed. The second spectacle is that of the fly, with all the weakness and insignificance that it stands for, forging ahead to those "great" gods to snatch away something they possessed. The gods are then choreographed in a scene where they chase the fly to take back what it had robbed them of, yet they are unable to do so.

This skilful approach to dialogue was intended to denude those gods of the attributes of divinity on the one hand, and subject them to ridicule on the other. This would render untenable the position of those people who believed in and worshipped them, for their belief did not stand on solid ground, nor was it worthy of any respect; rather the opposite, i.e. sarcasm, scorn and contempt.

These were some Qur'anic samplings of the approach espoused by the Prophet (s.a.w.) in his dialogue with the polytheists. This was in keeping with the human reality in facing what he believed in or that which others believed in. The Islamic experience and application of this approach in a polytheistic society proved successful. Besides, it is not that remote from other fields of faith and conduct in the battle of competing ideologies in the cause of life.

## Dialogue With the Atheists

After the ideological fight with polytheism, Islam stood up to the problem of atheism, although at a much lower scale. Given the fact that atheism was not then as widespread as polytheism, the campaign with which Islam faced the notion of atheism was very low key. This was because in the struggle with the polytheists, Islam had to contend with battling ideologies, viz. Islam and polytheism. What gave the battle that extra edge was the fact that polytheism was a way of life to the majority of members of society then. That ingrained tradition constituted an added hurdle to the norms Islam aspired to establish in that polytheistic society.

As for atheism, the issue was that of two ideological approaches, i.e. Islam vs. atheism, with the latter having no roots in society where the Islamic mission was born, despite the fact that atheism did have a presence in other communities. Thus, atheism did not constitute much of a threat to the fledgling Muslim society. The issue with the polytheists was not that they disbelieved in the existence of God, like the atheists, but that they associated gods with Him. They were, however, aware that their gods were not as great and important as God; rather, they felt that their worth was in their proximity to God, whom no one in this life can reach. To their mind, their worship of those gods was whittled down to believing that they were intermediaries and intercessors, whose job it was to bring people closer to God. The sacrifices they offered their gods were a means to achieving their pleasure and blessings. The following Qur'anic verse has put this in perspective: **"We only serve them in order that they may bring us nearer to Allah"** [39:3].

In consequence, the Qur'an, as has already been discussed, had set out to strip those of any quality, be it subjective or otherwise, which may render them objects worthy of respect in their own right, let alone their attaining a rank that brings them the closest to, and most favoured with, God Almighty. This was alluded to when we were discussing the style of dialogue that involves poking fun while allowing debate of the issue.

### The connection between theism and monotheism

This should not mean that polytheism has no connection with the idea of the existence of God, rather it has a bearing on the right conception of divinity, which puts the issue of belief in its natural context. This is

because, on its own, the idea is worthless, i.e. without the fundamental characteristics that give the whole picture the lustre it requires within the frame. For that reason, a great deal of discussion in the Holy Qur'an was dedicated to correcting the idea of divinity that people of old used to hold in their doctrinal conscience. Thus, when the Qur'an described their gods – as being incapable of creating anything, that they could neither reap benefit for themselves nor ward off any harm that could befall them, and that they could not cause death, bring forth life, or bring about resurrection – it aimed at criticising them for their corrupt idea of their brand of belief in God. It was trying to make clear to them that such qualities as eternity, creation, omnipotence and absolute affluence are among God's most salient ones. As such, we could consider them criteria by which we should judge the truth or falsity of any supposition of divinity.

Insofar as this aspect of Islamic belief is concerned, we consider the previous topic of dialogue with the polytheists as having a connection with this topic of dialogue with the atheists.

### The Qur'an lays down the guidelines for dialogue

It is worth mentioning that, at the start of discussing this topic, we stressed that the dialogue dispensed by the Holy Qur'an on the issue of proving the existence of God and rejecting atheism was very low key, compared to the dialogue conducted on the issue of monotheism vs. polytheism.

In this regard, it is notable that the Holy Qur'an started shaping the new way, which it wanted society to consider and espouse in dealing with issues. It started to call on people to ponder the universe and all the phenomena and creation within it, in a bid to search for its secrets and the natural laws that govern it. It desired man to fall back on the purity of his instincts while going about his business, and to his serene mind while thinking. If the purity of man's strongest feeling and the serenity of his intellect join forces and open up on the open book of universe, this is capable of leading man to the conclusive result, i.e. this universe has to have a Wise All-powerful Ruler.

For this reason, we find in the Qur'an a living and comprehensive document containing a plethora of information on cosmic phenomena and procedures that govern man's as well as life's development. This is so, because all that can be found in the universe is considered a living

matter, which induces thinking that leads, through the shortest possible routes, to belief in the existence of God.

It is noteworthy, though, that the Holy Qur'an does not confine its invitation to man to take in, at one go, all that is in the universe and let his mind wrestle with it. It tries to guide man's steps in order for these steps to take a firm hold at the beginning of the way.

## The universe, the book of belief

In order to discuss this issue, there is nothing better than experiencing the atmosphere of the following Qur'anic verses, which espouse a style of dialogue that is capable of urging man to examine and see for himself the strength of the Qur'anic side of the argument:

> **Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the Night and the Day; in the sailing of the ships through the Ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which God sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds which they trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth; (here) indeed are Signs for a people that are wise.** [2:164]
>
> **It is God Who causeth the seed-grain and the date-stone to split and sprout. He causeth the living to issue from the dead, and He is the One to cause the dead to issue from the living. That is God: then how are ye deluded away from the truth? He it is that cleaveth the daybreak (from the dark): He makes the night for rest and tranquillity, and the sun and moon for the reckoning (of time): Such is the judgement and ordering of (Him), the Exalted in Power, the Omniscient. It is He Who maketh the stars (as beacons) for you, that ye may guide yourselves, with their help, through the dark spaces of land and sea: We detail Our Signs for people who know. It is He Who hath produced you from a single person: here is a place of sojourn and a place of departure: We detail Our signs for people who understand. It is He Who sendeth down rain from the skies: with it We produce vegetation of all kinds: from some We produce green (crops), out of which We produce grain, heaped up (at harvest); out of the date-palm and its sheaths (or spathes) (come) clusters of dates hanging low and near: and (then there are) gardens of grapes, and olives, and pomegranates, each similar (in kind) yet different (in**

**variety): when they begin to bear fruit, feast your eyes with the fruit and the ripeness thereof. Behold! In these things there are Signs for people who believe. [6:95–99]**

**Allah is He Who raised the heavens without any pillars that ye can see; then He established Himself on the throne (of authority); He has subjected the sun and the moon (to his Law)! Each one runs (its course) for a term appointed. He doth regulate all affairs, explaining the signs in detail, that ye may believe with certainty in the meeting with your Lord. And it is He who spread out the earth, and set thereon mountains standing firm and (flowing) rivers: and fruit of every kind He made in pairs, two and two: He draweth the night as a veil o'er the Day. Behold, verily in these things there are signs for those who consider! And in the earth are tracts (diverse though) neighbouring, and gardens of vines and fields sown with corn, and palm trees – growing out of single roots or otherwise: watered with the same water, yet some of them We make more excellent than others to eat. Behold, verily in these things there are signs for those who understand! [13:2–4]**

Thus, you can feel life, in all its great aspects and dazzling beauty, moving before your eyes, living in your conscience and mind. All these experiences have come about at the outset of the existence of things, which are continuously kept new and move dynamically to jog your memory and conscience. They are trying to say that they are manifestations of the Omnipotence, demonstrating to you who their Creator is; the Creator who has given all these creations, be they animate or inanimate, all this greatness, beauty, and charm. Such merits bear witness to the secret of creation and the mightiness of the Creator.

It is such an exquisite approach to cultivate – while on the journey of gaining knowledge – your sensual perception with brilliance, your delicate taste with beauty, and your conscious intellect with the great secrets heaving within the great vastness of the universe.

More Qur'anic verses direct the attention to this truth in an unequivocal tone:

**Say: "Behold all that is in the heavens and on earth"; but neither Signs nor Warners profit those who believe not. [10:101]**

**Men who celebrate the praises of God, standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides, and contemplate the (wonders of) creation in the**

**heavens and the earth, (With the thought): "Our Lord! Not for naught Hast Thou created (all) this! Glory to Thee! Give us salvation from the penalty of the Fire". [3:191]**

**As also in your own selves: Will ye not then see? [51:21]**

It is a genuine invitation to reflect on the truth behind all that is in the earth and the heavens, which recognizes that it does not require man to do more than look and ponder. It is, at the same time, a call to send the mind forth in a drive to make it gain knowledge about the secrets of the universe and its laws on the road to a proper comprehension of such laws. This is in an attempt to make use of the new-found knowledge in all the spheres of a changing world and life.

## The road of science links up with that of religion

One can maintain that, in Islam, the road of science forms a junction with that of religion in the light of the notion put forward by the verses above. On the issue of belief in God, it is trying to entice man into discovering the Creator through finding out the magnificence of His creation. It can also be said that the way of religion links up with that of science, for the more man becomes knowledgeable the more he becomes cognizant of God; the more he becomes aware of God the more devout he becomes – God-fearing and compliant with His instructions; this is tersely put in this verse:

**Those truly fear Allah, among His servants who have knowledge [35:28].**

## The proofs of belief can be found in life rather than philosophy

The way the Qur'anic verses above handle dialogue, on proving the existence of God through cosmic phenomena and secrets, is indicative of the practical approach the Qur'an espouses. It has chosen not to discuss the issue in an abstract philosophical manner, which can turn it into a non-figurative one. This is an approach that would leave the intellect inanimate. It has chosen to debate the issue as a living being, i.e. a dialogue that fills life with the dynamism and renewal it is capable of. With this in mind, it calls upon man to give thanks to God and worship Him, to try to know Him through man's need to be thankful for His graces. This can make the process of identifying with God an end in itself and a means to thanksgiving and worship. Man cannot give thanks to, or worship, something he is not familiar with, albeit the universe and all the

magnificent things that are in it are proofs pointing to the existence of God on the one hand. On the other hand, these magnificent things are blessings man ought to show appreciation for.

The importance of this approach is that it is capable of making faith move with the day-to-day movement of life itself alongside the movement of the vast universe, which surrounds man. Furthermore, it is capable of giving an impetus to life to develop, renew, and carry on. This is bound to give Muslim activists the feeling of being part of life while conducting dialogue with others. Others, too, should not be made to feel that they are groping around in a haze of abstract ideas while trying to know God. Thus the question of cognition of God and belief in Him becomes the issue of life with all the strength, vibrancy, and continuity it manifests, not the issue of the imagination, which is in hot pursuit to find a foothold in the real world.

Although the Holy Qur'an is full of examples of this type of approach, we have chosen a few:

> **It is He Who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when ye knew nothing; and He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affections: that ye may give thanks (to God).** [16:78]
>
> **Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together (as one unit of creation), before we clove them asunder? We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe? And We have set on the earth mountains standing firm, lest it should shake with them, and We have made therein broad highways (between mountains) for them to pass through: that they may receive Guidance. And We have made the heavens as a canopy well guarded: yet do they turn away from the Signs which these things (point to)!** [21:30–32]
>
> **Hast thou not turned thy vision to thy Lord? How He doth prolong the shadow! If He willed, He could make it stationary! then do We make the sun its guide; then We draw it in towards Ourselves, a contraction by easy stages. And He it is Who makes the Night as a Robe for you, and Sleep as Repose, and makes the Day (as it were) a Resurrection. And He it is Who sends the winds as heralds of glad tidings, going before His mercy, and We send down pure water from the sky, That with it We may give life to a dead land, and slake the thirst of things We have created, cattle and men in great numbers.** [25:45–49]

As we sail through these Qur'anic verses, we feel that in our life from its inception to completion – whether we are eating or drinking, moving about, satisfying our needs with everything in the universe that God has created for us – we can deeply perceive the power of God's presence. It is an issue that is entwined with the secret of life, which we cannot be separated from, not even for a second. This should mean detachment from the import of existence, which could turn into a hypothesis looking for a foothold among the plethora of probabilities.

These examples, and others, would provide Muslim activists with the material necessary for elaborating on life when discussing any of its domains. Once they establish this, by winning over others to their side of the argument, they could talk about the Divine notion as one that is worthy of discussion, thus giving it a rational meaning in the process of raising public awareness of belief in God.

This role takes an added dimension of importance within the scientific fraternity, which is interested in sciences such as biology, physics, and chemistry. Entering the debate in the scientific domain may prove rewarding as to the secrets the different scientific disciplines can yield in the service of gaining factual knowledge about God Almighty.

## The rational way of thinking leads to belief in God

In conducting dialogue for the purpose of belief in God, the Holy Qur'an tries to advance the counter argument, i.e. against the argument for belief in God, within the framework of the rational way of thinking. The hallmark of this approach is providing possible assumptions, and then subjecting them to a procedure of proof or disproof. Thus, the outcome would be subservient to the end result that can pass the critical test. This is what the following Qur'anic verse has demonstrated:

> **Were they created of nothing, or were they themselves the creators? [52:35].**

The issue being discussed in the verse lends itself to three possible propositions:

1. That there is no Creator.
2. That the Creator is the same thing as the created.
3. That God is the Creator.

It could be said that the verse begs the question in a negative manner, i.e. rejecting the idea under discussion. Notion one is impossible, because

assuming occurrence, and the absence of a cause for the inevitable existence to be an indication of existence, should entail the existence of a power capable of creation, which would justify its being, since the assumption of existence and absence is symmetrical. This should make it necessary for existence to have been caused from outside the existent thing.

As for the second supposition, it is out of the question too. This is because presupposing that man had created himself should necessarily give way to the idea that he pre-existed, in that the thing should be in existence while non-existent. This theory is absurd, because you cannot suppose that something existent cannot exist, especially when it does exist. The contrary is true, because mutual contradiction is impossible. As a result, this would prove the third theory right, i.e. on the basis of this rational argument, God should prove to be the Creator.

In some other Qur'anic verses the approach assumes a different tone. The issue is tackled from two different hypotheses, (a) the Creator is God and (b) the creator is man. This is so proposed because the third theory, which rejects the question of creation giving preference to eternity, does not make sense in the possibility of existence.

This is what the following Qur'anic verses are trying to illustrate:

> **It is We Who have created you: why will ye not witness the Truth? Do ye then see? The (human Seed) that ye throw out, Is it ye who create it, or are We the Creators? We have decreed Death to be your common lot, and We are not to be frustrated from changing your Forms and creating you (again) in (forms) that ye know not. And ye certainly know already the first form of creation: why then do ye not celebrate His praises? See ye the seed that ye sow in the ground? Is it ye that cause it to grow, or are We the Cause? Were it Our Will, We could crumble it to dry powder, and ye would be left in wonderment, (Saying), "We are indeed left with debts (for nothing): Indeed are we shut out (of the fruits of our labour)" See ye the water which ye drink? Do ye bring it down (in rain) from the cloud or do We? Were it Our Will, We could make it salt (and unpalatable): then why do ye not give thanks? See ye the Fire which ye kindle? Is it ye who grow the tree which feeds the fire, or do We grow it?" [56:57–72]**

What is clear from these verses is that the subject being debated is not man and his coming into existence; rather, it is the phenomena that

envelope his life, starting from the coupling of the man's sperm and the woman's egg, which sets the process of creation forth, to life and death, to the seeds we sow, to the water we drink, and the fire we light. Who brought all this into being? Was it man or God?

In this regard, the holy verses are concentrating on man's inability to maintain these things and protect them against eventualities while they remain functioning according to the perfect systems that govern their every movement, beginning and end, outside man's will and influence. This should make us accept the notion that He who created all these things is the Creator of man, and is in possession of the absolute power in all this.

At the end of this topic, we would like to add that these verses deal with the issue from a perspective that may suggest that man is better advised to have recourse to his innate nature and perception as the final arbiter. That is, he should do away with philosophical arguments and analyses, for the issue of proof or disproof here is purely a matter for man's intrinsic conscience, as any person who would experience this will find out.

## Dialogue with the Rejecters of Resurrection

On the subject of resurrection and the last day of judgement, Islam has faced challenges in the forms of dismissiveness, ridicule, and having the conviction branded as a superstition, which, one should hasten to say, have no bearing on the truth whatsoever.

Those who hold these views do not have a proof to support their claims, apart from speculation and dismissal of the idea of resurrection outright. They do this because they cannot comprehend how life can be brought into inanimate remains. How could dust, i.e. all that remains from man after his death, turn anew into a human being, live and kicking? How could life be breathed into matter that is lacking in every department of life?

The Holy Qur'an used a number of approaches to hammer the idea home in order to remove the doubt that the idea is highly far-fetched, on the one hand, and to anchor the assertion on a solid base, on the other hand.

### Rationalism

Based on the rationalistic way of deduction, the Holy Qur'an has this to say to the proponents of the impossibility of resurrection:

> **And he makes comparisons for Us, and forgets his own (origin and) Creation: He says, "Who can give life to (dry) bones and decomposed ones (at that)?" Say, "He will give them life Who created them for the first time! For He is Well-versed in every kind of creation! The same Who produces for you fire out of the green tree, when behold! Ye kindle therewith (your own fires)!" Is not He Who created the heavens and the earth able to create the like thereof?" Yea, indeed! For He is the Creator Supreme, of skill and knowledge (infinite)! Verily, when He intends a thing, His Command is, "be", and it is! [36:78–82]**

> **Man says: "What! When I am dead, shall I then be raised up alive?" But does not man call to mind that We created him before out of [illegible]hing? [19:66–67]**

Thus, the issue of resurrection is as vivid and clear-cut as the vividness of life. If thinking about the unlikelihood stems from a naive conception, which is shocked by the idea of how life can rise from ashes that do not possess any quality of life, it can be proved to such a person that it is possible, i.e. by the parable of the beginning of life. One can pose the question of how it is possible for the seed, whose origins can be traced to dust, to be transformed into a human being. In answer to this question, we may possibly say that the Omnipotent, who brought the seed into being from dust, and gave birth to man from seed, gives the dust the secret of life, only to be transformed into a fully-fledged human being anew. The capability to move from nothingness to existence at the start can make it happen in the end. This is because the basis for existence and non-existence is one, i.e. indivisible and symmetrical.

## Sensualism

The Holy Qur'an has also discussed the sensualistic way, which endeavours to advance the idea, alongside similar ideas in life, through the dynamics of renewal and transformation in the creation of man and flora. It aims to bring the idea closer to the human mind, which continually experiences sensual perceptions. The following Qur'anic verses demonstrate this aspect:

> **O mankind! If ye have a doubt about Resurrection, (consider) that We created you out of dust, then out of sperm, then out of a leech-like clot, then out of a morsel of flesh, partly formed and partly unformed, in order that We may manifest (Our Power) to you; and We cause whom We will to rest in the wombs for an appointed term, then do We bring you out as babes, then (foster you) that ye may reach your age of full strength; and some of you are called to die, and some are sent back to the feeblest old age, so that they know nothing after having known (much), and (further), thou seest the earth barren and lifeless, but when We pour down rain on it, it is stirred (to life), it swells, and it puts forth every kind of beautiful growth (in pairs). This is so, because God is the Reality: it is He Who gives life to the dead, and it is He Who has power over all things. And verily the Hour will come: there can be no doubt about it, or about (the fact) that God will raise up all who are in the graves.** [22:5–7]

It is a realistic attempt at wanting the issue of resurrection to be a system for life. This notion is very well represented in the stages covered

by man's existence from inception, moving on, in each and every phase, from nothingness to being. It is also symbolized in the creation of plants, which die only to be reborn from the seeds sown in the soil.

## Resurrection, a facet of God's Omnipotence

The third approach tackles the issue from the perspective of God's Omnipotence; this is able to render any dismissal of the idea implausibly senseless. Since God's mightiness is manifested in all the things He created, why is it, therefore, not possible for such almightiness to cause dead things to come to life again? That is, why should there be less reason to apply this mightiness towards the end, than was possible to use it at the beginning? Besides, resurrection is not a greater act than creating the heavens and the earth, and other manifestations of creation. This spirit is beautifully captured in the following Qur'anic verses:

> **On the contrary, they say things similar to what the ancients said. They say: "What! When we die and become dust and bones, could we really be raised up again? Such things have been promised to us and to our fathers before! they are nothing but tales of the ancients!" Say: "To whom belong the earth and all beings therein? (say) if ye know!" They will say, "To God!" Say: "Yet will ye not receive admonition?" Say: "Who is the Lord of the seven heavens, and the Lord of the Throne (of Glory) Supreme?" They will say, "(They belong) to God". Say: "Will ye not then be filled with awe?" Say: "Who is it in whose Hands is the governance of all things, who protects (all), but is not protected (of any)? (Say) if ye know". They will say, "(It belongs) to God". Say: "Then how are ye deluded?" [23:81–89]**
>
> **See they not that God, Who created the heavens and the earth, and never wearied with their creation, is able to give life to the dead? Yea, verily He has power over all things. [46:33]**
>
> **Is not He Who created the heavens and the earth able to create the like thereof? Yea, indeed! For He is the Creator Supreme, of skill and knowledge (infinite)! Verily, when He intends a thing, His Command is, "be", and it is! [36:81–82]**

As you may have discovered, these verses did not want to take issue with those who did not believe in resurrection by simply dismissing their case directly. Rather, the Qur'an has preferred to put a few questions to them about what surrounds them in the heavens and the earth: To whom does all this belong? Who created it? And who has the dominion over

everything? This is with a view to guiding them to the omnipotence behind all this, on the way to recognizing God, who created all this and have power over it. This would, in the end, make them believe consciously that the Omnipotent who created the entire universe, would not find it difficult to breathe life into the dust and raise again from it a human being.

This is the approach that takes as a springboard for proving its argument, the sheer wisdom that catches the adversary unawares with the truth he has chosen to deny; yet it has defied him. This approach applies all this in such a way that the opponent's own convictions, which he could not abandon, serve as the cause for his surrender.

### Resurrection in the realm of God's wisdom

The dialogue takes a turn in a different direction, i.e. away from what is possible and what is not, and who is capable and who is not. It has chosen to set the idea within the parameters of the rationale behind existence. It has treated the issue of denial of resurrection as equal to dismissing the issue of creation as lacking in purpose, a drawback that cannot be attributed to God. This is the subject matter of this Qur'anic verse:

> **Did ye then think that We had created you in jest, and that ye would not be brought back to Us (for account)? [23:115].**

So, entrusting man with the responsibility would certainly make him face the consequences, for without it, the whole issue would turn into a purposeless exercise, which is unworthy of the almightiness of God, and of His wisdom and flawlessness.

### Conjecture is the root of denial

The dialogue thus returns to the notion we discussed at the beginning of this topic. That is, the denial with which they face the idea stems from their misgivings, which are baseless, and lies, which have no foundation. This is skilfully encapsulated in these two Qur'anic verses:

> **And they say: "What is there but our life in this world? We shall die and we live, and nothing but time can destroy us". But of that they have no knowledge: they merely conjecture: And when Our Clear Signs are rehearsed to them their argument is nothing but this: They say, "Bring (back) our forefathers, if what ye say is true!" [45:24–25]**

Thus, guided by the narrative of the Holy Qur'an, the Prophet (s.a.w.)

had set out from a premise that regarded proving an argument right or wrong as a basis for accepting or rejecting it. The second phase in the dialogue is that of stimulating the human mind to search for the details in order to acquaint itself with all aspects of the question. Should dialogue reap a conclusive result, it would have achieved its goal. Otherwise, the prudent position, in the context of belief, should be to give the opportunity to each and every idea to float and progress freely, provided that its movement does not result in a breach of the peace and order. Islam stretches its hand to those who differ with it from an ideological standpoint, so that it engages them in dialogue with that which is best:

> **"But if they hearken not to thee, know that they only follow their own lusts: and who is more astray than one who follow his own lusts, devoid of guidance from God? for God guides not people given to wrong-doing.** [28:50W.

# Dialogue with the Rejecters of Prophecy

## Unusual phenomenon

Prophetic missions attracted debate wherever they appeared. Those missions were extraordinary events in the life of the people, hence the argument. They were not designed to introduce change in those societies *per se*. They were not governed by human norms alone, be they strengths or weaknesses. They were calls characterized by their connection to metaphysics. One facet of this was divine revelation, a form of unseen communication with unseen powers that belong to a world that is different than ours both in appearance and nature. Thus these noble tasks were unwavering in their conviction, not prone to any weakness, and in the fundamental interest of life, because God, who is Cognizant of what is good or bad for man, had commissioned them.

The qualities which set those prophetic missions apart from other movements for change were responsible for stirring up arguments, the majority of which were heated, so much so that they were transformed into entrenched positions of outright rejection of the people who exemplified the notion of prophecy.

At first the line of questioning was narrowed down to the personality of the prophet, according to what people perceived such a personality should be. If prophecy signified an extraordinary event, it should manifest itself in an extraordinary person. Inevitably, the prophet should not be a human being, since prophecy related to a different world from that of humans and the line of communication was non-human.

This was the birthplace of the idea of not believing the prophets because, to the rejecters' mind, they were humans like them. They were eating and going about in the markets, which did not fit the overall picture they painted in their minds for a prophet, who, they thought should be an angel sent from heavens if he were to be able to carry the divine message.

The second argument was: Maybe we accept the notion of a man-prophet; however, he should be a person of paranormal capabilities, which should be an extension of the characteristics of the divine,

although not necessary similar. This was by virtue of the prophecy's office having an immediate access to God, and that carrying the message from Him, through revelation, should necessitate all that.

## Question marks

In such a climate, questioning the prophets, who were not different from ordinary people in their abilities and real situations in life, was the norm. Thus, they were not responsive to any request of them to do what was paranormal.

Besides those questions, the Islamic mission in the person of Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) faced questions of a different nature. Those different questions were posed to challenge what Islam stood for. The things which the doubt-mongers could not face with reason, logic, and informed debate, they branded witchcraft. They thus dubbed the Prophet (s.a.w.) a sorcerer in the guise of a poet, bent on collecting the superstitions of old, which were dictated to him day in day out. The issue turned relations sour and tense. They were characterised by grudge and animosity on the part of the unbelievers, so much so that they branded the Prophet (s.a.w.) a lunatic. That was just one description given to the Islamic message in the person of the Prophet (s.a.w.).

However, we are not claiming that these pejoratives were exclusively pinned on the Prophet of Islam, because the Qur'an has reported that the prophets (a.s.) were set up on and accused of lunacy: **"Similarly, no messenger came to the peoples before them, but they said (of him) in like manner, 'a sorcerer, or one possessed!'"** [51:52]. Nevertheless, we can assert that this was a salient phenomenon in the position of the enemies of Islam regarding the Prophet (s.a.w.).

## An attempt to enlighten the adversary

The Prophet (s.a.w.) confronted the onslaught of his foes in a calm and collected manner, as dictated by the strength of feeling about his message and deep self-confidence, on the one hand, and through informed recognition of the circumstances, reasons, and stereotyping that were prevailing in his time. These conditions contributed to the raising of those positions of rejection that were taken against his mission and lampooned his character. The false conception of the Prophet's mission and the social factors that were dominant then played a great part in this.

Because of their entrenched position, the Prophet (s.a.w.) engaged them in dialogue, with a view to correcting the false views they held about his ministry and its role in life. He also aimed to enlighten them about his own person and what he was capable of doing. Adhering to the same style of peaceful and calm dialogue, he did his best to correct their false views on the nature of his mission, the Qur'an, and the picture they painted of him. It did not escape him that the opponents' position was as a result of the highly charged conditions in which they were living.

As for the first issue, which was dealing with the correlation of prophecy to humanness, he managed to conduct dialogue on it in the way the Holy Qur'an has described, in two approaches: (1) an attempt to discuss the issue through the history of prophetic missions, i.e. how dialogue used to be conducted with the opposition forces in the lifetimes of bygone prophets; and (2) an attempt to take issue with the adversaries' misguided notion about his person, which contributed to the severity of the onslaught against his mission.

In the first approach, we come across the Qur'anic verses that talk about previous prophets who were held in respect by those Arab communities to whom the prophets were sent. We do not see why we cannot assume that those communities believed in those good people as prophets in their own right. The Qur'anic verses spoke of those communities rejecting the prophets for their humanness, which, they maintained, did not tally with the excellence of the office of prophecy. However, the prophecy did in the end overcome because of the positions the prophets took and the miracles they performed. In the final analysis, this left the opposition with no choice but to abandon the false convictions they were holding.

In the story of Noah (a.s.) and his people, the Qur'an has this to narrate:

> **But the chiefs of the Unbelievers among his people said: "We see (in) thee nothing but a man like ourselves: Nor do we see that any follow thee but the meanest among us, in judgement immature: Nor do we see in you (all) any merit above us: in fact we thing ye are liars!" He said: "O my people! See ye if (it be that) I have a Clear Sign from my Lord, and that He hath sent Mercy unto me from His own presence, but that the Mercy hath been obscured from your sight? Shall we compel you to accept it when ye are averse to it?"** [11:27–28]

Another verse talks about the style of debate between Noah (a.s.) and his people in not claiming for the office of pristine prophecy any supernatural feats or angelhood:

> **Say: 'I tell you not that with me are the Treasures of God, nor do I know what is hidden, nor do I tell you I am an angel. I but follow what is revealed to me.' Say: 'Can the blind be held equal to the seeing?' Will ye then consider not?** [6:50].

Other Qur'anic verses talk about the notion of the angel-prophet, which the opponents of Noah (a.s.) used to hold as an excuse for rejecting his mission:

> **The chiefs of the Unbelievers among his people said: "He is no more than a man like yourselves: his wish is to assert his superiority over you: if God had wished (to send messengers), He could have sent down angels; never did we hear such a thing (as he says), among our ancestors of old.** [23:24]

Thus the Qur'an discusses the story of Noah (a.s.) and his people to prove, in more than one verse, by the strength of his mission's proofs, the error of his people in their case for what they perceived as contradiction between man and message.

The issue had involved other prophets (a.s.), as the Holy Qur'an told us in the stories of prophets Hud, Saleh, and Shu'aib (a.s.). This is what it has to say about Hud's people:

> **And the chiefs of his people, who disbelieved and denied the Meeting in the Hereafter, and on whom We had bestowed the good things of this life, said: "He is no more than a man like yourselves: he eats of that of which ye eat, and drinks of what ye drink".** [23:33].

> **And this is what it has to say about Saleh's people: "They said: 'Thou art only one of those bewitched! Thou art no more than a mortal like us: then bring us a Sign, if thou tellest the truth!'"** [26:153–54].

On the tale of Shu'aib and his people, this is what the Qur'an has to say:

> **Thou art no more than a mortal like us, and indeed we think thou art a liar!** [26:186].

The Holy Qur'an summarizes the historical aspect of rejecting the idea of correlating humanness to prophecy. It concludes that all the previous prophets were human beings, possessing all the human physical

properties, and all the strengths and weaknesses which these qualities carry; this is how the Qur'an puts it:

> **Before thee, also, the apostles We sent were but men, to whom We granted inspiration: If ye realise this not, ask of those who possess the Message. Nor did We give them bodies that ate no food, nor were they exempt from death.** [21:7–8].

As for the second approach, we find Qur'anic verses that discuss the question of rejecting the Prophet's message on account of his being mortal and for his ordinary capabilities:

> **And they say: "What sort of an apostle is this, who eats food, and walks through the streets? Why has not an angel been sent down to him to give admonition with him? Or (Why) has not a treasure been bestowed on him, or why has he (not) a garden for enjoyment?" The wicked say: "Ye follow none other than a man bewitched". See what kinds of comparisons they make for thee! But they have gone astray, and never a way will they be able to find!** [25:7–8]

> **The Qur'an continues with the second aspect of dialogue in the same surah: "And the apostles whom We sent before thee were all (men) who ate food and walked through the streets: We have made some of you as a trial for others: will ye have patience? For God is One Who sees (all things)"** [25:20).

In the same breath, the Qur'an discusses the problem, in the following verses, with a view to taking issue with it:

> **They say: "We shall not believe in thee, until thou cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth, or (until) thou have a garden of date trees and vines, and cause rivers to gush forth in their midst, carrying abundant water; or thou cause the sky to fall in pieces, as thou sayest (will happen), against us; or thou bring God and the angels before (us) face to face: Or thou have a house adorned with gold, or thou mount a ladder right into the skies. No, we shall not even believe in thy mounting until thou send down to us a book that we could read". Say: "Glory to my Lord! Am I aught but a man, an apostle?" What kept men back from belief when Guidance came to them, was nothing but this: they said, "Has God sent a man (like us) to be (His) Apostle?" Say, "If there were settled, on earth, angels walking about in peace and quiet, We should certainly have sent them down from the heavens an angel for an apostle".** [17:90–95]

As is evident from these verses, the opponents demanded the accomplishment of those exploits as proof of the prophetic mission, because of their perception of what supernatural deeds a prophet must manifest. The answer came simple, calm, and direct, in that there was no way the prophet (a.s.) could entertain their requests, as he was a human being. The only thing that set him apart was that he was revealed to.

The verse arrives at another conclusion. That is, the misguided belief, throughout the history of nations who witnessed the prophetic missions and rejected the notion of the human-prophet, contributed to preventing men from embracing the faith. The Qur'an puts the issue in its right perspective from two angles:

> **1. Dismissing this false notion, as it did not stand on a solid ground. It further advocates that in the natural context of things, the prophet had to be a human being, as a prerequisite for the establishment of a harmonious and normal relationship between him and his followers. This was so because his task was not to convey the message *per se*; rather, he should be a living and true example of the message he had come to deliver. Should the prophet be an angel, or in a rank of physical ability higher than that of mortals, it would have been possible that people would have not treated the way he went about his business as a pointer to the credibility of his message, and that it could have been discharged by others.**

This is what the Holy Qur'an has expressed eloquently, when it recognized that the nature of the harmonious relationship between the prophet and his followers makes it necessary for God to send down an angel-messenger only if the target community on earth were an angelic one.

2. The reiteration is that the argument is flawed on a different count. That is, one should not feel the need for the prophet to possess paranormal powers, because his job was not to change the normal system of the universe or to carry out some supernatural works to impress those around him and show off his greatness. His only mission was to deliver the message, and the only condition was that he should be up to the task of receiving the message through revelation, conveying it to the people, and living it on the ground, in order to lead by example. Outside that sphere of activity, the issue was the exclusive domain of God Almighty; if He willed, He would give His prophet the required knowledge and make him perform miracles if it was necessary.

The clarity of this point can be seen in many Qur'anic verses that talk about the goals the prophetic missions were set to achieve. This had defined for the mission its terms of reference, which were two-pronged – spreading the message and laying down the law, on the one hand, and introducing change in society to achieve those two aims, on the other hand. The desired end result, was to be that people could go about their business in peace based on equity, understanding, co-operation, and abundant good.

These were the main features of the prophetic noble tasks:

> **Mankind was one single nation, and God sent Messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book in truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed; but the People of the Book, after the clear Signs came to them, did not differ among themselves, except through selfish contumacy. God by His Grace guided the Believers to the Truth, concerning that wherein they differed. For God guided whom He will to a path that is straight.** [2:213]

> **We sent aforetime our apostles with Clear Signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance (of Right and Wrong), that men may stand forth in justice; and We sent down Iron, in which is (material for) mighty war, as well as many benefits for mankind, that God may test who it is that will help, Unseen, Him and His apostles: For God is Full of Strength, Exalted in Might (and able to enforce His Will).** [57:25]

As for the Prophet's mission, its nature and general objectives, the Holy Qur'an has this to say:

> **Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, doth declare the Praises and Glory of God, - the Sovereign, the Holy One, the Exalted in Might, the Wise.** [62:2]

> **We have sent down to thee the Book in truth, that thou mightest judge between men, as guided by God: so be not (used) as an advocate by those who betray their trust.** [4:105]

> **Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, whom they find mentioned in their own (Scriptures) in the Law and the Gospel; for he commands them what is just and forbids them what is evil; he allows them as lawful what is good (and pure) and prohibits them from what is bad (and impure); He releases them from their heavy**

**burdens and from the yokes that are upon them. So it is those who believe in him, honour him, help him, and follow the light which is sent down with him, it is they who will prosper.** [7:157]

One can clearly see the tasks set for the prophetic missions. The clarity of the guidelines for both the ideology and law is all apparent. This is in the expectation that the rule of law should set forth from a foundation of right, justice, and the welfare of society, with a view to lighten the burden of its members. Such a burden could hinder their progress in building life on sound foundations. Another aspect is that of making the common interests of all people take root, with the aim of settling differences by dispensing equitable justice that neither deviates from the right path, nor does any one injustice. The ultimate result sought after is the spreading of peace based on understanding and fairness.

One can, therefore, conclude that there was no need for the prophet to possess supernatural powers which would enable him to perform miracles at will. Rather, what the prophet needed was that he should be up to the responsibility of carrying the message, delivering it, and applying it in practice wisely and flexibly, yet forcefully, as these are the merits any activist, legislator, or ruler needs to demonstrate in the discharge of their task. Consequently, the misguided thinking that used to connect prophecy with paranormal powers would prove false.

## Absolute superiority and prophecy

Here we may beg to differ from scholastic theologians with regard to their assertions that a prophet, i.e. any prophet, should excel in every discipline and department and in every personal characteristic. They base their assertions on the rational principle, i.e. repugnance at the notion of the inferior leading the superior. That is, if a prophet were not matchless in every department, he would not be worthy of the top office of prophecy.

Some theologians have gone further than that, by arguing that a prophet should possess personal qualities, such as the most handsome, the bravest, the strongest, etc., characteristics that should have no bearing whatsoever on being a prophet or leader. In real life situations, the leader, including a military one, should not necessarily be braver than members of the rank and file. You should not rule out the possibility that there could, among those members, be ones who are braver than the leader. The main role of a leader is not to fight the war; rather, to lead it,

from planning to execution, by virtue of the training and leadership prowess he has had. This is the case in all walks of life, i.e. what is required of the leadership in any domain is to excel in that particular field it is captain of.

We strongly take issue with those theologians over what they perceive of a prophet's capabilities. The role of the prophet was not that of a person who should lay down the building blocks for disciplines such as natural sciences and mathematics. It was not his job to teach linguistics. He was not required to be erudite in all disciplines or languages, let alone being peerless from a prophetic standpoint. As has already been outlined in the above Qur'anic verses, his task was to guide people to that which was good and serve warning to them against doing what was bad. That is, to deliver them from the darkness to the light – the way of the Mighty and the Praiseworthy.

This can clearly be gleaned from stressing the human nature of the prophet who had access to revelation, and categorically dismissing the notion that he could know the unseen, so much so that he was not in a position to ward off any harm that might have come his way; nor could he bring himself any good that might have been forthcoming:

> **Say: "I have no power over any good or harm to myself except as God willeth. If I had knowledge of the unseen, I should have multiplied all good, and no evil should have touched me: I am but a warner, and a bringer of glad tidings to those who have faith".** [7:188]
>
> **Say: "I am no bringer of new-fangled doctrine among the messengers, nor do I know what will be done with me or with you. I follow but that which is revealed to me by inspiration; I am but a Warner open and clear".** [46:9]

However, God may favour his messenger with some private knowledge:

> **He (alone) knows the Unseen, nor does He make any one acquainted with His Mysteries, Except an apostle whom He has chosen: and then He makes a band of watchers march before him and behind him.** [72:26–27].

Some Qur'anic verses talk about the linguistic knowledge of the Prophet, only to dismiss it. This was the story of the unbelievers accusing him of being taught by some person. The Qur'anic answer was unequivocal, in that the person who, they alleged, was coaching him

was non-Arab, whereas the language of the Qur'an was clearly Arabic. How could the charge then stand? It is obvious that this answer would not have been sufficient to leave the unbelievers dumbfounded, unless the Prophet was not conversant with the tongue of the non-Arab person in question, because it would have been possible for the Prophet to understand him or to translate what he was dictating to him about the Torah and the Bible, or other narrative:

> **We know indeed that they say, 'It is a man that teaches him'. The tongue of him they wickedly point to is notably foreign, while this is Arabic, pure and clear.** [16:103].

We feel a certain reticence about agreeing with the proponents of the notion that makes it necessary for a prophet to be superior in everything. Our position is based on the fact that a prophet did not need all that. However, we cannot see why a prophet could not possess most of these superior qualities, both realistically and objectively, i.e. as distinct personal qualities, not prophetic by necessity, according to conclusive rational judgement, as they maintain.

## Dialogue on the nature of the Qur'an

Is the Qur'an the word of God, which He revealed to Mohammad (s.a.w.) in order that it could be viewed as a proof of his prophetic mission and authority over people? Or is it the word of Mohammad (s.a.w.), i.e. either composed by him or copied for/by him from the narratives of old, including the People of the Book?

This question was being circulated in the Arab society that witnessed the advent of Islam. For them, it was a burning issue in need of an answer to settle their acceptance or otherwise. It might also have been an accusation thrown in to challenge the Prophet (s.a.w.) in his noble task. This was because the Qur'an had represented the strength of the Islamic message in the context of proving it right and capable of reaching the community (*ummah*).

The stand-off was indicative of the magnitude of the message, which had braved the challenge with reasoned and calm dialogue that did not only aim to leave the adversaries speechless but also wanted them to see the strength of its argument. If not, it aimed to demolish their stubbornness by jolting their minds so that they could start making independent judgement, not from a standpoint of animosity to the Islamic faith.

## Breaking the stalemate

In order to break the deadlock of the debate, the Qur'an tried two approaches.

1. Counter-attack

By challenging the opponent to imitate it, even with one *surah* (Chapter). This demand was not confined to a certain group of people. It went further than that, by giving them the opportunity to enlist the help of all other creatures, human and jinn, regardless of their educational standard, individually or in a joint effort. Confident that they were unable to accept the challenge, the Holy Qur'an proved their powerlessness to meet the challenge.

History did not report any genuine or successful experience in this regard. This is in spite of the fact that the adversaries of Islam did not spare any effort in scoring points against the Prophet and his mission in the entire struggle that was raging between the two camps. To combat the relentless campaign of falsehoods and fabrications that was waged against the Holy Qur'an by the adversaries, Islam had sought to argue thus: If the Qur'an were the words of a mortal, it should have reflected certain ideological or cultural levels that were prevailing in life. This would make it susceptible to emulation, either in the same measure or over and above its style. Should the reverse happen, i.e. the Qur'an is inimitable, the end result would prove that it is the word of God, nothing can match, or be superior to, it.

The objective here was not to silence the opponents; rather, the Qur'an had sought to make the challenge as a means to their accepting the Islamic viewpoint that was put to them. This is brilliantly portrayed in these Qur'anic verses:

> **Or they may say, "He forged it," Say, "Bring ye then ten Surahs (Chapters) forged, like unto it, and call (to your aid) whomsoever ye can, other than God! If ye speak the truth!** [11:13]
>
> **And if ye are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our servant, then produce a Surah (Chapter) like thereunto; and call your witnesses or helpers (If there are any) besides God, if your (doubts) are true.** [2:23]

This Qur'anic verse sums up the mood:

> **Say: "If the whole of mankind and jinn were to gather together to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like**

**thereof, even if they backed up each other with help and support. [17:88].**

2. The rational analytical approach.

This approach subjects the opposing argument to a restrained critical examination. The Holy Qur'an adopted this approach in three areas:

### a. Uncovering some aspects of the cultural history of the Prophet

As for his schooling, he never read a book, wrote a letter, or attended a school, as is evident from these terse verses:

> **And thou wast not (able) to recite a Book before this (Book came), nor art thou (able) to transcribe it with thy right hand: In that case, indeed, would the talkers of vanities have doubted. [29:48]**
>
> **And thus have We, by Our Command, sent inspiration to thee: thou knewest not (before) what was Revelation, and what was Faith; but We have made the (Qur'an) a Light, wherewith We guide such of Our servants as We will; and verily thou dost guide (men) to the Straight Way. [42:52]**
>
> **Accounting for the period of the Prophet's life with his people, before he was revealed to: "Say: 'If Allah had so willed, I should not have rehearsed it to you, nor should He have made it known to you. A whole lifetime before this have I tarried amongst you. Will ye not then understand?'" [10:16].**

Before he was charged with the responsibility of delivering the message of Islam, the Prophet had lived among his people for forty years, he neither said nor alluded to anything that might have led to any indication of what would become of his future. In this, there is a clear proof that neither the message, nor the Qur'an emanated from the Prophet's own personal capabilities. It is unlikely, if not impossible, that a person who had any ideas would have lived in utter silence for forty years without at least talking about his views. Man's conduct, by word and deed, would be a natural mirror of his opinions on life, the like of which is the light of the sun and the water gushing forth from the spring, all without choice or will.

The Arab society in which the Prophet was born and lived did not lend itself to the birth of an ideology on a par with the Qur'anic one, whose culture is multi-dimensional, especially in the different fields of knowledge, legislation, ethics, secrets of the universe, and psychological,

social, or moral issues. All this was somehow alien to the limited educational standards of the society of the Arabian peninsular, which used to embrace a single-dimensional culture, i.e. literary excellence.

The reference to this matter could be gleaned from the Qur'anic description of members of the Meccan society, i.e. being ignorant and in manifest error:

> **It is He Who has sent amongst the Unlettered [the Gentiles] an apostle from among themselves, to rehearse to them His Signs, to sanctify them, and to instruct them in Scripture and Wisdom, although they had been, before, in manifest error.** [62:2].

The Prophet was not linked to any other cultural environment. Nothing in his biography points to any long journey he took for schooling. His travels included two trade trips to Syria. Those trips did not take longer than it took a person to travel, using the conventional transport available in those days. They took place at a period long before his emigration to Medina. In both the journeys, the Prophet did not get to Beirut, which was then the centre of knowledge and scholarship. He travelled as far as Busraa, as has been mentioned in his biography.

### b. The rational approach to dialogue on the subject

The case for attributing the Qur'an to some other person, i.e. to the exclusion of God, was clear in claiming that he was non-Arab[1]. It is noteworthy, though, that, as we have already mentioned, the Prophet did not speak any other language besides Arabic. How could the teaching be plausible? How could the translation/interpretation be possible? Besides, should the youth have been the source of these words, the language used would have been foreign, thus:

> **We know indeed that they say, It is a man that teaches him. The tongue of him they wickedly point to is notably foreign, while this is Arabic, pure and clear.** [16:103].

[1]In the Prophetic biography by Ibn Hisham (vol. 1 p. 264] it is mentioned that this person was a Roman Christian youth, named Jubair al-Hadhrami -- who did not speak Arabic. Yet, he was lettered. He used to work in Makkah as a swordsmith. Sometimes, the Prophet used to call on him to watch him work. The unbelievers accused the Prophet of being coached by that youth in that which was revealed to him. In response, God revealed to His Prophet verse 16:103.

### c. The Qur'an is consistent

All the issues, concepts and laws the Holy Qur'an has tackled have been characterized by consistency. It can be said, therefore, that the argument that tries to attribute the writing of the Qur'an to the Prophet (s.a.w.) would necessarily mean that it would contain contradictions and discrepancies. [Supposing that it is true] what could substantiate this type of argument is the fact that the Qur'an was revealed in different places and circumstances over a long period; this would, as a consequence, have made it lacking in cohesion, in that a mortal is usually accident-prone and liable to make mistakes. This has been succinctly captured in this verse:

> **Do they not consider the Qur'an (with care)? Had it been from other than God, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy.** [4:82].

Thus, in all that we have demonstrated of Prophet Mohammad's approach to dialogue with his opponents, who cast doubt on the Qur'an being the word of God, you will become aware of the spirit of the Islamic approach, an approach that desires to place the dialogue in a positive territory. That is, on the side of knowledge about, and conviction of, the issue being debated by the strength of evidence, not through a whipped-up atmosphere that is not conducive to an honest and fruitful debate.

### How did the Prophet face up to the campaigns of distortions?

The challenges that the adversaries of Islam were mounting targeted the Prophet himself at the outset. They aimed to assassinate his character. In their crusade, they attempted to portray him as a very ordinary human being; this effort included branding him as a poet and a sorcerer just to lull public opinion into believing that he did not know what he was talking about. In so doing, his opponents sought to discredit him and strip him of any sanctity or a leading role in introducing reform in society. Their tactics did not stop there; they dubbed him a lunatic, although he did not show any signs of insanity to make others believe that he was. Nevertheless, they managed to create conditions that were conducive to people's accepting anything said about him without independent judgement. It was a frenzied state of affairs. This is how the Holy Qur'an puts it:

> **And the Unbelievers say of the Truth when it comes to them, 'This is nothing but evident magic!'** [34:43]. **So they wonder that a Warner has**

**come to them from among themselves! And the Unbelievers say, 'This is a sorcerer telling lies!'** [38:4].

Although the Prophet (s.a.w.) was on the receiving end, he took everything that was thrown at him and kept his spirits high. As an individual, he did not care what type of vilification would befall him. Thus, he did not respond to those attacks of character assassination. Only when those campaigns were meant to tarnish the Message of Islam that he was charged with propagating, would he stand up to defend the faith in the face of those deliberate attempts to discredit it.

Thus, on the count of branding him a poet, he called them to compare carefully what issues the poets tackled, the climate they lived in, and the methods they adopted, with the Holy Qur'an – on the issues it had dealt with, the climate it had promoted, and the approach it had employed. The Prophet made it manifestly clear to them that, in the final analysis, they would find the Qur'anic style far removed, in every department, from that of poetry. The same was argued when it came to accusing him of dabbling in witchcraft and divination. The Qur'an had not used any means to deceive, cast spells on people or pull the wool over their eyes. Rather, it is a book which appeals to people directly, armed with well-thought-through ideas and clarity of purpose, using a calm and tender approach and sweet words, only to win them over after they have judged those ideas against their own criteria.

God says:

**That this is verily the word of an honoured apostle; it is not the word of a poet: little it is ye believe! Nor is it the word of a soothsayer: little admonition it is ye receive. (This is) a Message sent down from the Lord of the Worlds.** [69:40–43]

**We have not instructed the (Prophet) in Poetry, nor is it meet for him: this is no less than a Message and a Qur'an making things clear.** [36:69]

**And say: "What! Shall we give up our gods for the sake of a Poet possessed?" Nay! He has come with the (very) Truth, and he confirms (the Message of) the apostles (before him).** [37:36–37]

Prophetic biographers tell of the story of Walid bin al-Mughira, a Quraishite and arch-enemy of the Islamic Message, who spontaneously dismissed the idea that maintained that the Qur'an was a form of poetry

or a narrative of divination. The story says that he heard some Qur'anic verses being recited to which he was receptive, only to be accused of apostasy and that he was going to cause members of the Quraish tribe to abandon their religion. In a damage limitation exercise, Abu Jahl was sent to him to tout his qualities and noble lineage and wealth, requesting him to say something bad about the Qur'an, so that his people would believe that he was averse to it. He said:

> *What am I going to say? By God! None of you is better informed about poetry in all its departments, including that of the jinn. What the Qur'an is saying can never be compared to any of those literary achievements. By God! What it says is exquisite, and there is an air of splendour about it. Its style stands head and shoulders above all literary forms.* Abu Jahl retorted*: By God! Your people are not going to be appeased until you have disapproved of the Qur'an. He replied: give me some time to think; having done so, he said: This is nothing but the word of a mortal. Haven't you seen him sowing discord between man and wife, and master and slave?*

As the story goes, this position has precipitated this revelation:

> **Leave Me alone, (to deal) with the (creature) whom I created (bare and) alone! To whom I granted resources in abundance, and sons to be by his side! To whom I made (life) smooth and comfortable! Yet is he greedy that I should add (yet more); By no means! For to Our Signs he has been refractory! Soon will I visit him with a mount of calamities! For he thought and he plotted; And woe to him! How he plotted! Yea, Woe to him; how he plotted! Then he looked round; then he frowned and he scowled; then he turned back and was haughty; then said he: "This is nothing but magic, derived from of old; this is nothing but the word of a mortal!"** [74:11–25]

Prophetic biographies tell the story in a different version, as in Ibn Hisham's version (vol. 1, pp. 174–175 [abridged]), thus:

> *At the start of the annual literary, mainly poetic, gala, a group of Quraish, among whom was Walid bin al-Mughira, gathered together. Al-Mughira said to them: "The annual festival has started. The delegations of the Arab tribes will call on you, having heard of the story of your kinfolk. You are better advised to speak with a single voice. Show neither disagreement, nor squabble among yourselves". They said: "What do you say?" He said: "What do you suggest I*

*say?" They said: "Shall we say that [the words of the Qur'an] are those of a soothsayer?" He said: "We have seen soothsayers. They are not those spoken by them". They said: "Then we shall say they are of one who is possessed". He said: "We have seen insane people. The words do not have any resemblance to those of an obsessed or deluded person". They said: "Let us say, they are the words of a poet?" He said: "They are not. We have seen poets and are conversant with all types of poetry". They said: "Shall we say, they are those of a magician?" He said: "They are not, as we have seen the sorcerers and their witchcraft. The words do not bear resemblance to those who are in the business of casting spells and blowing on knots". They said: "What could we then say?" He said: "By God! The words are as sweet as dates. You cannot have anything of this. It is false. The nearest you can describe it [the Qur'an] is that you say, its words are those of a wizard, in that it has come with a narrative that is capable of sowing discord between son and father, brother and his brother, man and wife, and man and his kinfolk". Having dispersed, they took positions on the roads leading to the venue where the annual fair used to take place; not a single passer-by had gone through, without their instigating them against the Prophet (s.a.w.) and the Message he came to deliver, hence this revelation:*

**For he thought and he plotted; And woe to him! How he plotted! Yea, Woe to him; how he plotted! Then he looked round; then he frowned and he scowled; then he turned back and was haughty; then said he: 'This is nothing but magic, derived from of old; this is nothing but the word of a mortal!'"** [74:18–25]

It is obvious that the word "magic", which al-Mughira chose to be the charge that could prove the "falseness" of the Message, is not what magicians usually captivate their audience with. Rather, it is the "magic", i.e. enthralment, one experiences as one listens to the idea, the word, and the style [of the Holy Qur'an].

As for calling the Prophet a madman, it was a description, which did not even prove credible to those who were using it; it was heard *ad nauseam*. That was why, in the process of the Prophet's conducting debate with them – by that which is best – the Qur'an enjoined them to reflect deeply on what they were accusing the Prophet of, and soon would conclude how self-ridicule would be their lot:

> **Say: 'I do admonish you on one point: that ye do stand up before God, (It may be) in pairs, or (it may be) singly, and reflect (within yourselves): your Companion is not possessed: he is no less than a warner to you, in face of a terrible Penalty'. [34:46].**

As is evident, the Prophet (s.a.w.) did not react angrily, as do those people who are easily agitated when they are provoked and start trading insults with the opposite side. He was calm and collected in all his exchanges with the adversaries of Islam. That is because he did not view it as a personal matter. It was a matter of the Message he was sent to spread. It was, therefore, inevitable that dialogue was conducted in a way which served the interest of the noble task. It was guided by Islam's straight path, its ideology and tolerance, and due to the confident position it took, thus:

> **Or do they say, "He is possessed"? Nay, he has brought them the Truth, but most of them hate the Truth. [23:70)**

> **And the Unbelievers would almost trip thee up with their eyes when they hear the Message; and they say: "Surely he is possessed!" But it is nothing less than a Message to all the worlds. [68:51–52]**

> **And (O people!) your companion is not one possessed. [81:22]**

These Qur'anic verses talk calmly about the person of the Prophet (s.a.w.). In the first verse [23:70], it stresses that the matter does not relate to any conviction on the part of the unbelievers; rather, it had come to the fore because of a grudge they harboured against the truth with which the Prophet was sent. While they did not want to have anything to do with the issue, they did not want to be seen to be averse to it. So, the only alternative they had was to brand the Prophet a lunatic.

In the second batch of verses [68:51–52], God describes the state of bewilderment, dismay, and annoyance of the unbelievers, which made them look down on the Prophet (s.a.w.) for the Remembrance (Message) he was propagating. Then, the Qur'an soon makes us realize the connection with reality, as to the nature of the divine revelation, by inviting us to consider it, in order to reach the conclusion that it is a Remembrance and good counsel for mankind.

The third verse [81:22] is dismissive of the question as a matter of principle, in that it does not offer any explanatory or analytical answer. Rather, it suggests that the issue does not lend itself to any argument or a counter one for it is so clear that it does not leave any room for debate.

In some verses, we find the Prophet being labelled as having been possessed by the jinn, which is slightly different from dubbing him a lunatic. In this regard, the Qur'an has not gone further than branding them oppressors on two counts, i.e. on not doing themselves justice in setting up partners to God and on being unjust to the Prophet (s.a.w.) by manufacturing false accusations against him. It therefore concludes that those unjust people have gone astray and can never find a way:

> **We know best what it is they listen, when they listen to thee; and when they meet in private conference, behold, the wicked say, 'Ye follow none other than a man bewitched!' See what similes they strike for thee: but they have gone astray, and never can they find a way. [17:47–48].**

# Dialogue with the People of the Book

Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) did not engage in any struggle with the People of the Book in Makkah, as the Meccan society was predominantly polytheistic. This could explain the dearth of revelation in Makkah, which might have recorded any dialogue or argument between the two parties. The other reason might have been that at the top of prophet's agenda was fighting idol worship and polytheism. Besides, the People of the Book did not pose much of a problem to Islam.

## Empathy with Christianity

In the early days, we might notice a kind of sympathy and affinity between the Prophet (s.a.w.) and a far-flung Christian community. This was apparent in the flight of early Muslims to Abyssinia (present day Ethiopia), where they found a haven, peace, and security, which enabled them to practise their religious worship. There is reference to this incident in the Holy Qur'an, as well as in history annals. Muslims who migrated to Abyssinia were guaranteed the protection of its king. When Quraish followed them to inflame his feelings against them, he preferred to believe the Muslims' side of the story. Alongside his courtiers, the king listened to the Muslims as they were reciting to him the Qur'anic verses, which tell the story of Jesus and his mother (a.s.), and the great spiritual aspects of Islam, God has revealed to His Prophet (s.a.w.). The king and his people found this related to what they believed in, i.e. the spirituality of pristine Christianity, so much so that they could not hold back their tears:

> **Strongest among men in enmity to the believers wilt thou find the Jews and Pagans; and nearest among them in love to the believers wilt thou find those who say, "We are Christians": because amongst these are men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant. And when they listen to the revelation received by the Apostle, thou wilt see their eyes overflowing with tears, for they recognise the truth: they pray: "Our Lord! We believe; write us down among the witnesses". [5:82–83]**

## Treaty with the Jews

Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) emigrated to Medina to lay the foundation for the new Islamic society. There he came face to face

with the Jews; it is noteworthy that there were no Christians in Medina. He did not want to clash with the Jews, as he did not want to open up a new front of confrontation. Instead, he let wisdom prevail, by signing a treaty with them, whereby the followers of each of the two faiths could live side by side in peace and harmony. The treaty was indicative of a new reality, i.e. religious tolerance built on a solid base of both religious groups recognizing what unified them. Thus, both opted for the middle ground, where dialogue was the way forward to a mutual understanding, away from bigotry and prejudice.

It is in the interests of genuine Muslim researchers to understand how realistic and dynamic was the Islamic movement in the arena of doctrinal as well as social strife. Such readers in history are advised to study the aforesaid treaty, which is a great document paving the way to exemplary co-existence of religions, if only to know how Islam considers dialogue the bedrock of settling conflict. This is indicative of its drive to create the right conditions, which open the way to the birth and nurturing of ordinary relations based on mutual respect, both religiously and humanly, in a climate that is not governed by bigotry but rather based on reason and law.

Before we examine this treaty, as a prelude to understanding the nature of struggle between Islam and the Jews among the People of the Book, we find it necessary to reiterate one point we reckon is important. It is that the treaty was not a unilateral agreement between the Prophet (s.a.w.) and the People of the Book. It was in the general harmonious climate that was prevalent in the field of relations between the believers themselves. So the treaty was part of this relationship, which was indicative of the fact that the Prophet (s.a.w.) wanted to transform civic society into a mosaic of tribal and religious persuasions, be they the Meccans who migrated with him to his new base, the Medinites who supported him, or the People of the Book, regardless of their creed. The driving force behind this thinking was the recognition that the future of the entire society, its security and welfare were paramount. That is, without any qualms on Islam's part as a new religion. This would lead us to conclude that Islam did not harbour any enmity for, or intentions of war against, the People of the Book, Jews included. On the contrary, it was planning long-term projects for peaceful co-existence between religions.

## The treaty's text

The following is the text of the said treaty, as has been recorded by Ibn Hisham in his Prophetic Biography:

> *Ibn Ishaq said: The Messenger of God (s.a.w.) wrote an undertaking, in the presence of Muhajireen [lit. migrants – the Meccans who migrated with the Prophet to Medina] and Ansar [lit. supporters – among the residents of Medina]. In the undertaking, he confirmed that peaceful co-existence with the Jews had been achieved, that he recognized their religion, and that they should feel secure in their possessions. There were stipulations both the parties to the agreement should honour:*
>
> In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful: This is a letter from Prophet Mohammad for the believers and Muslims among Quraish and Yethrib [old name of Medina], and all those who would follow them and take part in the jihad with them. They are one nation (*ummah*) [or community], to the exclusion of other people. The *Muhajireen* of Quraishite descent, in their stronghold, should co-operate and ransom the distressed among them with fairness and equity, as is the case among believers. Banu Awf, in their original stronghold, should co-operate, and each group should ransom the distressed among them with fairness and equity, as is the case among believers. [The wording of the previous sentence has been repeated for the following tribes: Banu Saa'ida, Banu Jashm, Banu an-Najjar, Banu an-Nabeet, Banu Aws.] The believers should not abandon any person, heavily in debt, without helping them out equitably in ransom or blood money.
>
> A believer should not make an alliance with the servant of another believer without his knowledge. The devout believers should come together against him who transgresses or seeks to oppress, do injustice to, sow corruption or be aggressive against anyone among them; they should join hands against the transgressor, even if it be one of their offspring. An unbeliever should not be supported against a believer. God's covenant of protection is one; the least significant of people should be given sanctuary. The believers should stand united more so than others.
>
> [It has also been agreed] that, who joins us from the servants of the Jews, they should qualify for our support and be treated as one of us; they should neither be oppressed, nor ganged up against. In war in the cause of Allah, a believer should not, separately, seek peace with an unbeliever, except with justice and fairness. The believers can replace one another in the bloodletting that has befallen them in the cause of Allah. The devout among the believers are the best guided and on the right path. A

polytheist should not withhold money due to a Quraishite, nor a soul; he should not withhold it from a believer. Whoever caused the blood of a believer to be spilled with proof, he would be held responsible, until he comes to agreement with the next of kin of the slain person; all the believers should take a position against him.

[It has also been agreed] that, it is not permissible for any believer who testified to this document, and believed in Allah and the last Day of Judgement, to lend support to any initiator of evil or mischief, nor shelter him. He who supports and provides him with shelter should be mindful that Allah's curse shall abide with him till the day of judgement; he would not be bartered or compensation accepted from him. Whatever you disagree on, you have to seek to settle it by having recourse to Allah, the Most High, and Mohammad.

That, Jews and Muslims are to finance the war, so long as they are being fought. That, the Jews among Banu Awf are a community like the believers. The Jews have their religion and the Muslims theirs, masters and slaves alike. The exception being those who transgressed or sinned. They have themselves to blame. The Jews of Bani an-Najjar have the same rights as the Jews of Banu Awf. [The last sentence had been repeated so as to mention the Jews from other tribes, i.e. Banu Saa'ida, Banu Jashm, Banu Aws, Banu Tha'laba]. Those who relate to Tha'laba should receive the same treatment as members of Tha'laba themselves. That which Banu Awf have right to, should be equally given to Banu Shutaiba. Doing good deeds is highly commended to the exclusion of doing evil. The servants of Tha'laba should receive the same treatment as their masters. Those in the fold of the Jews are to receive the same treatment accorded to the Jews themselves. That, no one of them should go out, except with the permission of Mohammad. That, not a single wound should be inflicted in revenge. That, whoever does harm to himself, he should have himself to blame, except those who were done injustice. God is capable of mending this.

That, the Muslims would provide sustenance for themselves, so would the Jews. They should stand united against him who wages war against the signatories of this treaty. They should give good counsel to one another and enjoin what is good, to the exclusion of what is evil. No one should be made to suffer for a crime his ally has committed. Help and support should be given to the one who is wronged.

That, the Jews should finance the war effort so long as they are being fought. Yethrib is a sanctuary for the signatories of this treaty. That, neighbours are on a par with oneself, without prejudice. That, the privacy of the individual should be respected.

That, should there be any quarrel or discord, whose potential danger

could be great, should be referred to Allah, the Most High and to Mohammad, the Messenger of Allah. Allah is with the most sincere parties of this treaty and the good among them. That, no haven should be given to Quraish and their allies. [The signatories of this treaty] should help each other, if Yethrib came under attack; should they be called to make peace, they should respond in kind. Should this happen, they should have the same responsibilities of the believers, except those who fought for the faith, for each party their own share with their counterparts. The Jews of Aws and their slaves have the same rights and responsibilities of the signatories of this treaty of that which is purely fair.

Ibn Hisham then said:

Fairness is more praiseworthy compared to evildoing. Whichever bad deeds committed by any person, they have themselves to blame. Allah is with those signatories of this treaty who are most well intentioned and the most just.

This treaty should not be viewed as providing protection for those who transgress or do evil. Residents of Medina should feel secure, whether they remain within its boundaries or go out of it, except the transgressors and mischief doers.

## The Jews in confrontation with Islam

That treaty would have endured and created the right conditions for religious tolerance and peace, had it not been for the Jews' unwillingness to contribute to cementing that climate, in that they were bent on standing against the new religion and its Prophet.

Quoting the Prophetic Biography of Ibn Hisham, Ibn Ishaq has this to say:

*Thus, the rabbis harboured enmity to the Messenger of God (s.a.w.) out of transgression, grudge, and envy for that which God has favoured the Arab with, i.e. by sending them a Prophet from among themselves. Some men of the tribes of Aws and Khazraj, who were still clinging to the tradition of their forefathers, i.e. idol worship, joined the Jews in plotting against the Prophet (s.a.w.). Although those polytheists ostensibly embraced Islam when they saw it spread far and wide, yet in their heart of hearts they did not; they were hypocrites. Their leanings were with the Jews in their rejection of Islam's Message and branding the Prophet a liar. The rabbis did their best to confuse the issues and turn truths into falsehoods by arguing with the Prophet, so much so that much of the Qur'anic revelations at*

*that period were talking about the rabbis and their corrupt ways; very little of the Qur'an during the same period, which was, in the main, dealing with matters of what was permissible and what was not, was revealed*[1].

It is evidently clear that the Jews initiated the argument, in an effort to stir up trouble by raising tendentious questions about the Message of Islam and its Messenger (s.a.w.). These were diversionary tactics designed to distract the Prophet from pursuing the main thrust of his noble mission, i.e. in making the new religion take root in society. The rabbis aimed also to distract Muslims from concentrating on their new life under Islam, through the misgivings and worries they sowed in the Muslims' hearts and minds, and the divisions and discord they sought to spread among their ranks.

How did the Prophet (s.a.w.) respond to this onslaught? Did he declare war against them? Not at all. The Prophet (s.a.w.) did not want to make that skirmish the start of a full-blown war. Instead he was determined to lay down the guidelines Muslims should adhere to in their debate with the People of the Book, be they Jews or others.

## Islam plans for the ideological debate with the People of the Book

In his effort to activate interfaith dialogue, the Prophet (s.a.w.) was resolute in creating the right conditions for it. He wanted to steer the debate away from highly charged climates, in order to make it conducive to achieving the required goal: either total agreement between the parties of the debate, or consensus on shared positions, based on clarity of vision on what each party was up to.

Islam has been practical and realistic in this regard. It recognizes that the concept of peaceful co-existence between religions, whose banner it has hoisted high, should not necessarily mean recognition that the arena is free from the causes of struggle which may lurch from time to time. It also recognizes that these factors should not prevent Islam from going about its mission in spreading its message with other religions and those who have no religion.

In this light, it is necessary to lay down the basis, both in concept and methodology, on which the struggle should be shaped. This is with a view to insulating the climate of co-existence from the rainy days of struggle,

[1]Ibn Hisham , vol. 1, p. 358.

which may beat the drums of war or lead to it. Thus, the main features that set the path for a rational and fruitful debate, began to appear.

As for the concept, the main issue was to start from a common ground, which could strengthen co-existence and explore more shared aspirations, or at least the possibility of discovering new instances of meeting of minds.

Concerning the methodology, it was seeking the best, the most superior, and the most pleasant of the language of dialogue, its dynamism and general ambience. Using harsh words should not be tolerated, so long as the debate can be conducted calmly; nor is it advisable to resort to hysterical methods, when the alternative should be an informed debate conducted in a friendly atmosphere.

The aim behind such an approach is to provoke the minds of others and make them recognize that Islam respects their thought and feelings, and that it does not attempt to treat them flippantly. What it does is to confront others by begging answers to the questions it poses and inquiries it raises. The provided answers are the starting point of a realistic, free and calm debate, not an interrogation session that may encroach upon man's dignity and pride. Islam does not want this to happen, because it is in search of belief that is arrived at through personal conviction. Both of these can only be found in conditions where freedom and tranquillity can prevail.

## Main thrust of the approach

> **And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury): but say, "We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our God and your God is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam)". [29:46]**
>
> **Say ye: "We believe in God, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) Prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them: And we bow to God (in Islam)". [2:136]**

Thus, it has laid down the foundation for dialogue with the People of the Book by that which is the best, barring the unjust among them because their aim is not a desire to get to know the truth. Rather, they

seek to transgress, make trouble and do mischief to the best of their ability, and circumstances permitting. It is inevitable, therefore, that they are dealt with by that which would prevent them from perpetrating injustice and aggression; there can be no dialogue with them whatsoever.

The Qur'an did not theoretically elaborate on this approach to dialogue. It has attempted to present the practical side of it by calling it "that which is the best", so that we may uphold it. The approach is a blend of the methodology and the concept on which belief in Islam is based; a faith that is a bridge between religions. It is so because it does not have any reservations about respecting the sanctity in which other religions hold their prophets, the doctrines they believe in and the laws they uphold. Islam believes in all the prophets (a.s.) that were sent before Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.). It believes in all the Books that were revealed by God to the other prophets in the same way it holds sacred the Book that was revealed to Mohammad. The bedrock of its belief is monotheism, which it shares with other monotheistic religions. In the beginning and in the end, Islam's belief is submission to the Almighty in whatever shape or position it may take in the context of the truth and peace.

This approach may suggest that by believing in what others hold sacred, in the same way that Muslims hold what they believe in sacred, Islam does not recognize their existence, insomuch as its position is not compromised. This may be attributed to paying attention to niceties and in seeking common ground for coming together at the expense of real positions. On the contrary, it is in keeping with the realities of Islam; this reality is capable of giving all parties to dialogue the feeling of ideological and spiritual affinity. It may also reassure them that meeting with Islam would not take them away from their original positions as a matter of principle.

### The approach provides an insurance policy against isolationism

It is obvious that as Islamic activists, we are in need of this approach to dialogue in many spheres. It is always desirable that we make our start from the positions that bring us together with the opposite side rather than those which keep us apart. This is capable of guiding our steps to that common ground. This is applicable to doctrinal matters as well as to other issues, be they of life in general or those of a personal nature.

Dialogue conducted in this manner is capable of keeping Muslim activists, calling for the way of God, away from falling into the trap of

social and political isolationism, which may prove a hindrance to advancing their point of view. As is apparent from the aforesaid Qur'anic verses, the activists may make their starting point in dialogue by discussing matters of common interest, before delving into the details of doctrine and life in general. This could be a prelude to winning peoples' hearts and minds, and then moving from a solid base to wider audiences. Others should not be given the chance to exploit the indulgence of Muslim activists in details about the faith as a springboard to accusing them of being far removed from the real issues, be they social, economic, or political, that concern the people most.

The advantage of addressing the real issues is there to see. The achievements political groups and parties make from espousing slogans, which are receptive to peoples' aspirations and issues, are all apparent. However, the Islamic movement, in general, seems to be timid, sitting on the fence and letting others pass it by, for abiding by the fundamental barriers which set it aside from them. That is, without grasping the nettle in matters of common interest. Thus, the Islamic movement has been left at the beginning of the road, almost standing still, alongside other groups, whose feet became numb from the length of standing. They were left in a limbo due to the belief that they should forbear and wait aimlessly without even attempting to see whether there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Nevertheless, we do not see why we cannot join the convoy, but without losing our distinct Islamic character, exactly in the same way that others can come together without losing their identities. This, we believe, does not go contrary to Islamic injunctions, which recognize that finding common denominators with others is a good base to achieving much needed freedom of movement in the struggle with others and for their own sake. We need not go further than examining the following Qur'anic verses to prove the legitimacy of this approach insofar as the nature of the notion and methodology of dialogue are concerned. Yet, the trouble with many of us is that we seem to behave in a way that may suggest that we believe in certain parts of the Book and disbelieve in others when it comes to dealing with the unbelievers. We seem to lean heavily on those Qur'anic verses that call for showing toughness with them, rather than those that call for espousing leniency and tolerance. We do not appear to stand back and try to differentiate between those verses in the light of any given circumstance.

## Building on positions of agreement

> **Say: "O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than God". If then they turn back, say ye: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to God's Will)".** [3:64]

This Qur'anic verse agrees with the previous one [2:136] in discussing fundamental issues of common interest to all religions. That is, pure monotheism, which is neither tempered with open polytheism or idol-worship, nor is it a latent polytheism that manifests itself in personality cult worship, taking them for lords to the exclusion of God:

> **They take their priests and their anchorites to be their lords beside Allah. And (they take as their Lord) Christ, the son of Mary; yet they were commanded to worship but On God: There is no god but He. Praise and glory to Him: (Far is He) from having the partners they associate (with Him).** [9:31]

This approach to dialogue starts from agreeing, in general terms, the topic of debate without going into the details, with a view to circumventing stirring up sensitivities with regard to certain practices. Should agreement be reached on the terms of reference, the way would then be open to examine the details directly.

The importance of this approach lies in the possibilities that the objections raised could have stemmed from ignorance of the main thrust of the faith, or be due to being completely overtaken by the reality of how it is being practised, without being able to tell the difference between ideology and practice. It is, therefore, desirable that dialogue should concentrate on the general idea in a thought-provoking exercise.

This is what the Holy Qur'an is trying to underscore as regards examining the details. It explains beyond any doubt that, according to the verses above, they have deviated widely from what they truly believe in, as is evident from verse [9:31], **"They take their priests and their anchorites to be their lords beside Allah. And (they take as their Lord) Christ, the son of Mary".** That is, in spite of the difference that they assert exists between the rabbis and monks on the one hand, and Jesus Christ (a.s.) on the other. In other words, what their position demonstrates is pure divergence from the line of monotheism, which the Qur'an has put

forward as a basis for mutual consensus between religions, and that there is not much of a difference between the two positions.

## Why did the Qur'an target the rabbis and monks?

One may pose the question as to why the Qur'an appears to direct the dialogue to the relationship between them [Jews and Christians] and their rabbis and priests, in spite of the fact that this relationship had nothing to do with doctrinal matters. There is no evidence of their claiming that they [rabbis and priests] are gods. Rather, the issue seems to be related to sheer submission to rabbis and priests, without necessarily believing that they are gods.

However, the answer is perhaps due to their power in influencing people's lives and the way they think, and their bitter and determined stand against Islam's Message. They did their best to obstruct people from joining the way of God, which was opened up by the new religion, for they were apprehensive that they might lose their privileged positions. Thus, they were bent on making mischief among, and misleading, people by falsifying and tampering with the revealed Books they were supposed to be the guardians over. Those fabrications contributed to damaging any chance of religions coming closer and finding a common ground.

The concept that the Qur'an has advanced is in keeping with the fact that religions have a common denominator, in that no person should have any concession over the rest, irrespective of their rank or worth. No one should have the right of setting themselves up as rivals to God insofar as total submission is concerned. No mortals, including the prophets (a.s.), possess any of God's attributes, not even an iota thereof. The prophets' job was to deliver the Message entrusted to them by God, and to call on people to submit to Him. Should there be any divine instruction to obey the prophets, it was based, as we understand it, on total submission to God, which is the moral fibre of, and the driving force behind, their missions.

The Holy Qur'an has clarified this situation in many verses. It has painted a bleak picture for rabbis and priests, especially the sinister work they were intent on carrying out against the Scripture they were supposed to uphold as sacred:

> **O ye who believe! There are indeed many among the priests and anchorites, who in Falsehood devour the substance of men and hinder (them) from the way of God. And there are those who bury gold and silver and spend it not in the way of God: announce unto them a most**

> **grievous penalty. On the Day when heat will be produced out of that (wealth) in the fire of Hell, and with it will be branded their foreheads, their flanks, and their backs, their flanks, and their backs. "This is the (treasure) which ye buried for yourselves: taste ye, then, the (treasures) ye buried!"** [9:34–35]

In rejecting the worship of personality cult, to the exclusion of God, the Qur'an has this to say:

> **It is not (possible) that a man, to whom is given the Book, and Wisdom, and the prophetic office, should say to people: "Be ye my worshippers rather than God's": on the contrary (He would say) "Be ye worshippers of Him Who is truly the Cherisher of all: For ye have taught the Book and ye have studied it earnestly". Nor would he instruct you to take angels and prophets for Lords and patrons. What! Would he bid you to unbelief after ye have bowed your will (To God in Islam)?** [3:79–80]

## The matter concerns the Muslim clergy who follow this route

These holy verses assert that the Qur'an's denunciation of the actions of this group of the People of the Book is not confined to them; rather, it extends to include people of the same kind who are devious and evil-minded. This is so, because the Qur'an does not condemn people in themselves but rather for what they hold in thought and do in practice, which they help spread through time and place.

In this spirit, we can conclude emphatically that the verses suggest that their message is directed to that brand of the Muslim clergy who put themselves above the people. Those who exploit their religious mantle to unjustly amass wealth, unlawfully procure concessions, set up barriers between people and the noble values of the faith, flatter the affluent and the powerful at the expense of the principles of the faith and people's real issues, and use their social standing to damage people, not least by favouring a relative, albeit at fault, and disregarding an unconnected person, albeit in the right. Thus, the right loses its appeal and value in their lives as a criterion for appraising people and judging things. The tradition (*hadith*) in the Qur'anic commentary attributed to the eleventh Imam of the Progeny of the Prophet (a.s.), al-Hassan bin Ali al-Askeri, seems to allude to this, when commenting on this Qur'anic verse: **And there are among them illiterates, who know not the Book, but (see therein their own) desires, and they do nothing but conjecture** [2:78]. He has been quoted as saying:

*[Referring to the verse] a man said to Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.): If those illiterates among the Jews and Christians were not familiar with the Book, only with that they hear from their clerics, how come they have been criticized for listening to their clerics? Aren't our illiterates like those of the Jews and Christians, i.e. in emulating their clerics? So, if those had been at fault in accepting what their clerics were telling them, our illiterates should not necessarily do likewise.*

Imam as-Sadiq (a.s.) said: *Between the laymen of our people and their scholars (ulema) on the one hand, and the laymen among the Jews and Christians and their priests, on the other hand, there are similarities and dissimilarities. The similarity starts with God's displeasure with the laymen among our people for the way they emulate their ulema, in the same way He showed His displeasure with their laymen.*

*Where there is difference, the answer is in the negative. The man retorted: Explain to me O Son of the Messenger of God! The Imam (a.s.) said: The laymen among the Jews knew that their rabbis lied openly, devoured what is illicit, and accepted bribes; they were bent on falsely interpreting the laws driven by nepotism, cronyism, and favouritism; they [the laymen] were familiar with their [rabbis] entrenched bigotry, which had been a cause for their departure from their true faith, for this would lead to trampling the rights of those on the receiving end, and by siding flagrantly with the party at fault, whom they showed favour to. Thus, they do injustice to the weaker party, although in the right; they made them condone doing that which is forbidden; the laymen knew full well that whoever did what they did of wrong was a renegade who should not be believed to the exclusion of God's instructions, nor should he be taken seriously when it comes to the dealing between the people themselves. That is why God denounced them for their following those [rabbis] whom they knew were not sincere and that they should have not believed their narrative. They should have not acted on the misleading counsel of their rabbis; they should have instead examined matters for themselves in that which the Messenger of God came to them with, which is clearly manifest.*

*Likewise, if our laymen have known that their jurists were in manifest error, peddling bigotry, running after worldly gains and that which is illicit, and putting the person whom they are angry with in harm's*

***way, although they might be in need of correction; conversely, they show favour and good to the person they like, although their share should be insult and degradation. Whoever among our laymen emulated such type of jurists, they should be treated in the same way as the Jews whom God denounced for emulating the renegade among their doctors of religion. As for him, among the jurists, who is mindful of preserving his integrity, upholding his faith, going against his caprice, and submitting to his Lord, the laymen can follow him [in matters of religious practice and law]*[1].**

The crux of the matter is that divine messages have not been sent down to create from the people who are entrusted with them an elitist group, enjoying privileges without right and practising whatever they like without being held accountable. Rather, they have been sent to liberate man from the bondage of his fellow human and grant him the feeling of dignity and worth, through efficiency and good work, so that he seeks the truth from a position of intellectual freedom without yielding to another human being. He, alongside other human beings, should stand united before God in complete and pure sincerity, submission, and servitude.

Lastly, man should not feel that his faith should constitute any barrier to his relationship with others, and that he can forge relationships, at any juncture, on the basis of the truth. Rather, he should be looking far afield in his journey in search of the truth.

## The Prophet stands up to the challenge

The People of the Book, especially Jews, did not respond to Prophet Mohammad's genuine call, as it was revealed in the Qur'an. They started plotting to bring Islam down from within on the one hand, and cast doubt on its validity and sullied its reputation on the other hand. This attitude was translated into latent and blatant moves against Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.).

Nevertheless, the Prophet (s.a.w.) did not abandon the Islamic approach in either dialogue or practice, since both seek to arrive at convictions through the shortest possible route. This is so because Islam has not adopted its approach outside the arena of challenge; rather, it has made its starting point from a position of taking the challenge head-on in

[1]At-Tibrisi, al-Ihtijaj, vol. 2, p. 263.

powerful wisdom and wise power. That is, from a general belief in calling for what it espouses with wisdom and good counsel. The Divine address to them had remained calm and the Prophet (s.a.w.) had kept challenging them with the signs of God by way of evidence and counter-evidence, and claim and counter-claim. However, at times, his tone was sharp because the issue was not confined to trying to show them the strong side of the argument; rather, to weaken their stranglehold on people for stirring up trouble for the new religion, and mounting stumbling blocks in its way. This was the rationale behind uncovering their scheming and history, and laying bare everything which makes innocent people trust and deal with them.

In the main, these actions were directed towards the Jews because they lived with the Prophet (s.a.w.) and ganged up against him overtly and covertly. They took the Scripture as a cover to draw on its sanctity, so that they would be secure and inviolable in their social standing, both for their own personal gratification and in the eyes of others.

The issues that Islam conducted dialogue on were many and varied, depending on the issues its enemies brought up or Islam wanted to discuss.

Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) started the dialogue with them on the subject which they were trying to promote, wearing the attire of sanctity through it, viz. the Scripture, and using it as a shield. Before the advent of Islam, they used to hoist it in the face of unbelievers as evidence of the forthcoming prophet, whose coming the Torah had heralded. However, they turned their back on the Prophet after the advent of Islam and after the unbelievers, with whom they were plotting, had converted to Islam:

> **And when there comes to them a Book from God, confirming what is with them, although from of old they had prayed for victory against those without Faith, when there comes to them that which they (should) have recognised, they refuse to believe in it but the curse of God is on those without Faith.** [2:89]

## The Qur'an puts forward for dialogue the prophecy of Mohammad

The issue which the Prophet (s.a.w.) wanted to discuss for a start was his prophecy, which the Qur'an confirms was the gospel of both Moses and Jesus (a.s.) in the Torah and the Bible, thus:

> **Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, whom they**

**find mentioned in their own (Scriptures) in the Law and the Gospel; for he commands them what is just and forbids them what is evil; he allows them as lawful what is good (and pure) and prohibits them from what is bad (and impure); He releases them from their heavy burdens and from the yokes that are upon them. So it is those who believe in him, honour him, help him, and follow the light which is sent down with him, it is they who will prosper.** [7:157]

Reference to the description of the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his companions has been made in the two Holy Books:

**Muhammad is the Messenger of God; and those who are with him are strong against Unbelievers, (but) compassionate amongst each other. Thou wilt see them bow and prostrate themselves (in prayer), seeking Grace from God and (His) Good Pleasure. On their faces are their marks, (being) the traces of their prostration. This is their similitude in the Torah; and their similitude in the Gospel is: like a seed which sends forth its blade, then makes it strong; it then becomes thick, and it stands on its own stem, (filling) the sowers with wonder and delight. As a result, it fills the Unbelievers with rage at them. God has promised those among them who believe and do righteous deeds forgiveness, and a great Reward.** [48:29]

This was mentioned again in the context of the story of Jesus (a.s.):

**And remember. Jesus, the son of Mary, said: O Children of Israel! I am the messenger of Allah (sent) to you, confirming the Torah (which came) before, and giving glad tidings of a messenger to com after me, whose name shall be Ahamad.** [61:6].

In this light, the Holy Qur'an called upon the People of the Book to bear witness to the Prophethood of Mohammad on account of the testimony of the Torah and the Bible. He requested them to show the Torah and make it clear to the people so that they could see for themselves the evidence in favour of the Prophet and his prophecy. In many verses the Qur'an reiterated their responsibility for concealing what they knew of the Book, warning them against severe punishment, as is evident from these verses:

**And remember God took a covenant from the People of the Book, to make it known and clear to mankind, and not to hide it; but they threw it away behind their backs, and purchased with it some miserable gain! And vile was the bargain they made!** [3:187]

> **The People of the Book know this as they know their own sons; but some of them conceal the truth which they themselves know. [2:146]**
>
> **Those who conceal the clear (Signs) We have sent down, and the Guidance, after We have made it clear for the People in the Book, on them shall be God's curse, and the curse of those entitled to curse. [2:159]**

## The Qur'an demands that the Torah be revealed

This is how the Qur'an wanted the debate to start, i.e. from the base they rely on in what they believe or disbelieve. However, they did not agree to engage in debate on this basis in order for the debate to achieve its objectives.

This is symptomatic of the fact that the challenge mounted by the Qur'an hit its target, albeit we know that it is truthful in what it discusses. Had they been honest in dismissing what the Qur'an talked about, they need not have made any effort to deny it. It would have sufficed to present the Torah to the people, thus rendering false the Prophet's claim. Yet, they knew for sure that accepting the challenge would render their claim false.

On a different issue, the Qur'an challenges them to reveal what is in the Torah to prove some legislative matters, which the Qur'an asserts that they lied about. This is in its narrative on licit and illicit food:

> **All food was lawful to the Children of Israel, except what Israel made unlawful for itself, before the Law (of Moses) was revealed. Say: "Bring ye the Law and study it, if ye be men of truth. If any, after this, invent a lie and attribute it to God, they are indeed unjust wrongdoers" [3:93–94].**

This is how simple and straightforward the Qur'an is in its demand from the People of the Book, of the issues it brings forth and they deny. It says to them: Let us have recourse to the Torah, the shared document, where the people can see the evidence for themselves. The Qur'an thus proves its practical style in conducting dialogue, i.e. the pursuit of common parameters, which all the parties can agree and set the dialogue forth.

## The need for such a style in present-day struggle

In this day and age there is a need for such a style of debate, especially with some ideological trends of unbelief. These groups espouse thought that is usually diametrically opposed to that which is mainstream and sacred. The exponents of these ideologies sometimes try to conceal what

they believe in, lest it should be taken as evidence against them by the masses that they try to mislead. An example of this is some groups that base their philosophy on purely materialistic matters and do not believe in anything outside the realm of senses. It considers religion to be the "opium of the masses". Other ideologies, although not sharing the same platform with the atheistic materialistic ideology, consider religions, Islam included, to be a sort of human creed or system that is subject to the circumstances and time in which it was born and prevailed, and that its role ends with the end of that particular phase. This, they contend, is in keeping with what has become of other doctrines or systems, which gave way to new thought and laws. According to these trends, religion should turn into a heritage like other kinds of heritage that are celebrated just as memory, or a source of inspiration to fill us with pride and sing our praise, nothing more and nothing less. These claims contribute to putting religions at a disadvantage by opening the way to their adversaries to discriminate against them both politically and socially. This is also bound to mislead people, especially the less educated among them who are not in a position to check the principles of these religions for themselves from their sources, i.e. literature.

The proponents of these ideological trends may resort to denying the doctrinal origins, in a way that suggests to people that they are fabrications made by imperialistic powers, which seek to unjustly discredit national movements. These tactics may find listening ears because they become accustomed to imperialistic malicious propaganda and intrigue.

There may be a need to adopt the Qur'anic approach to the showdown with the Jews, who were bent on rejecting the evidence they were familiar with so that it should not be used against them. The debate started by challenging them to seek arbitration with their Scripture, which has all the evidence. It had also tried to extract from them conclusive confession of the truth they were trying to hide; that is, in situations of a general nature, which they could not pull out from. The aim being that one of two positions should be extracted from them: either (a) responding to the challenge, which was bound to reveal their true position and thrust them into accepting the engagement in dialogue – a face-to-face showdown, or (b) recognizing the truth as an honest position or just for the record. This can strengthen the position of the truth and weaken falsehood in its movement within life.

## The dialogue of the Prophet with the Jews in their impossible demands

It appears that there was nothing the Jews were going to stop at. In a bid to provoke the Prophet (s.a.w.) and weaken his position before naive people, the Jews set out to demand him to carry out some paranormal treats. Yet, as ever the Prophet (s.a.w.) was calm and collected. He did not want this verbal stand-off to be the start of a full-blown war; rather, he did his best to espouse the main thrust of the Islamic approach to dialogue. He was responding to each and every question with the most suitable of answers, in an effort to prove that the Prophethood had a wider outlook and was more accommodating. Thus, it would not be dragged into a fight that it did not want, or into an argument that could lead to nowhere. The answers, therefore, were succinct and decisive. They brought to the fore the history of previous prophetic missions, which those people followed, and the positions they took on them. This was in order to establish that their position on the new prophet was an extension of their contra-position on their prophets, only to arrive at the conclusion that they harboured inherent grudge, animosity, and hatred for the divine messages.

The Holy Qur'an gives us some examples of those entrenched positions:

> **The People of the Book ask thee to cause a book to descend to them from heaven: indeed they asked Moses for an even greater (miracle), for they said: "Show us Allah in public, but they were seized for their presumption, by thunder and lightning". Yet, they worshipped the calf even after clear signs had com to them; even so We forgave them; and gave Moses manifest proofs of authority; and for their covenant We raised over them the Mount (Sinai); and (on another occasion) We said: "Enter the gate with humility"; and (once again) We commanded them: "Transgress not in the matter of the Sabbath". And We took from them a solemn covenant. (They have incurred divine displeasure): in that they broke their covenant; that they rejected the Signs of Allah; that they slew the messengers in defiance of right; that they said: "our hearts are the wrappings", nay, Allah hath set the seal on their hearts for their blasphemy, and little is it they believe; that they rejected Faith; that they uttered against Mary a grave false charge.** [4:153–56]

It is noteworthy that the Holy Qur'an did not answer the question directly; it has chosen to expose their historical positions towards Moses (a.s.), the prophet they followed, in what they asked him to do, the covenants they broke, and the works they carried out against him and against the prophets who were sent after him. This had rendered the question an everlasting one that was characterized by blasphemy and corruption throughout.

This account can serve as an answer that infuses the idea through historical facts. It was not strange for those who asked Moses (a.s.) to show them God publicly, even though they knew about monotheism in his message that God cannot be seen, to ask Mohammad (s.a.w.) to send down to them a book from heaven, despite the fact that this could not materialize for God's will barred sending down the message in this way. Whoever had wanted to live the spiritual life of faith, could have done so through the evidence which the message exhibited.

The stubborn, who did not want to have anything to do with the faith, regardless of the overwhelming evidence, would do anything in their power to dismiss what the prophets came with as pure sorcery, or anything else. The matter was, therefore, not one for dialogue or argument because the other party was not interested in a debate that could lead to the truth:

> **They (also) said: 'Allah took our promise not to believe in a messenger unless he showed us a sacrifice consumed by fire (from heaven).' Say: 'there came to you messengers before me, with clear signs and even with what ye ask for: whey then did ye slay them, if ye speak the truth'.** [3:183].

This is yet another pretext for not believing because of a new request for a proof of the message, i.e. **"unless he showed us a sacrifice consumed by fire (from heaven)".** That would, to their mind, be a proof sent down by God, as He promised.

It can be gleaned from this verse that they were trying to suggest that they were powerful by virtue of their relationship with God and their proximity to Him. This is a deliberate ploy in order to exert psychological pressure on the masses, who were not firm in the knowledge of these matters to be able to accept or reject.

The answer had come in the form of a historical account, in that these demands were not new. They had been made to bygone prophets, who

used those approaches to win people over to their side of the argument when they proved effective on the front of belief. The prophets responded to those demands, as they had reacted to the other demands, but to no avail. The adversaries' response was to cover up their failure before the prophets by using force against them; repression, torture, and murder were some of the violent ways they used with the prophets.

For this reason, there was no way the Prophet (s.a.w.) would have acceded to their request, for history would have repeated itself, in that their aim was just to defy the Prophet and prove him incapable *per se*. They were not looking for an answer to the problem in justification of their entrenched position of blasphemy and misguidance.

There can be found, in the Holy Qur'an, many of these examples, i.e. forces of unbelief and their confrontational style, on the one hand, and the prophets' style of dialogue, which was characterized by calmness and kindness, without tension or rage, on the other hand.

## The Qur'an responds to the Jews with gentle counsel

In other verses, the Qur'an takes a calm position on the issue of belief and unbelief of the Jews. It expresses disappointment with them, in that they should have been at the forefront of those wanting to embrace the new religion, instead of being its arch-enemy, not least because it had confirmed their Scripture with clear proofs, in which case, it should have made the issue of following him a case of submitting to God, worshipping Him, and giving thanks to Him for all the graces He showed to them.

This style, although it blends rebuke with a feeling of disappointment, yet it is still imbued with preaching and good counselling, with a view to manipulating a whole range of factors that could animate their conscience and stimulate their brains. This had been a way to try to overcome the psychological barrier that led them to reject the Faith. A way that had linked the present with both the past and the future in this world – what they preach and what they practise – and standing before God on the Day of Judgement to answer for their malpractices. That is, treating religion in the same way that they barter goods, with all the haggling it involves, and leaving God behind them.

Let us spend some time with the following Qur'anic verses, where God addresses the Israelites:

> **O Children of Israel! Call to mind the (special) favour I bestowed upon you, and fulfil your covenant with Me and I shall fulfil My covenant with you, and fear none but Me. And believe in what I reveal, confirming the revelation which is with you, and be not the first to reject Faith therein, nor sell My sings for a small price; and fear Me, and Me alone. And cover not Truth with falsehood, nor conceal the Truth when ye know (what it is). And be steadfast in prayer: Give Zakat [the poor rate], and bow down your heads with those who bow down (in worship). Do ye enjoin right conduct on the people, and forget (to practise it) yourselves, and yet ye study the Scripture? Will ye not understand? Nay, seek (Allah's) help with patient perseverance and prayer: It is indeed hard, except to those who are humble. Who bear in mind the certainty that they are to meet their Lord, and they are to return to Him. O Children of Israel! Call to mind the (special) favour which I bestowed upon you, and that I preferred you to all others; then guard yourselves against a day when one soul shall not avail another, nor shall intercession be accepted for her, nor shall compensation be taken from her; nor shall any one be helped (from outside).** [2:40–48]

This is a style that combines leniency with toughness, and counselling with warning, in order to moderate any psychological complex that may form a barrier between man and the right path, should there be any room for guidance to that path. The Qur'an had sought, from these verses, to create the right conditions, i.e. calm and tranquillity, that might prove conducive to conducting a meaningful dialogue as a way of life. That is, when the confrontational ponder on the matter they might, perchance, feel the need to think straight and be practical, after the reasons for doubt and the fabrications have been removed, only for the truth to look them in the eye.

Let us carefully examine the ingredients of this approach of reasoning. To start with, God reminded them of the favours He had done them, to the exclusion of other people. He then asked them to honour their covenant with Him, so that He can honour His side of the deal in this world and the hereafter. The Qur'anic verses ended with a stern warning, should they not be mindful of their duty towards Him. In such a situation, God put them face to face with the new religious call, for responding to it positively would be the natural outcome to thanksgiving for the favours bestowed, keeping the covenant, and fearing God.

Then God Almighty turned His attention to their corrupt practices, which were manifested in confusing falsehood with the truth, concealing the truth, and neither performing prayers nor giving the poor tax, in spite of the fact that they knew that this was unlawful. God did not conceal His displeasure and bitterness with them for enjoining people to do good deeds, while they themselves did not practise the same. By way of helping them to mend their ways, He commended them to get help through fasting and prayer, which are the ways for the soul to ascend, in submission and peace, to loftier levels. That is, when the soul finds solace and strength in the feeling that it is going to meet with God.

The appeal closed as it had started: counting the favours God had bestowed on them, admonishing them to fear Him and be pious, because a day will come when nothing can avail, apart from man's good works, so that work should be man's slogan for success in this world and happiness in the hereafter. This brilliant style paints a picture of how man can have audience with God, giving account of all his deeds and aspirations, past, present, and future, in this world and the hereafter, all in a bid to shoulder responsibility with clarity of vision.

## Espousing the approach is worthy of bearing fruit

It is desirable to use this approach in facing up to the entrenched position of those who are bent on confrontation. Perhaps creating the conditions for such an atmosphere would pay off, not least because the factors of concentration and excitement would be available to man to explore matters in depth and come up with a position.

It should be borne in mind, however, that the place for giving good counsel should not be overlooked, because it is capable of transporting the soul to an impending audience with God, when every soul will stand accountable to Him. The soul may yield when preached, especially at times of spiritual transparency that may take it to the realm of God's spirit.

## The Qur'an continues the dialogue in order to expose the positions

The Qur'an continues the dialogue and creates the right conditions for it, so that it could reveal their changing positions, and insulates people against their influence after it had given up on the possibility of their coming back to the right path. God had made this abundantly clear to His Prophet, Mohammad (s.a.w.):

**Even if thou were to bring to the People of the Book all the signs (together), they would not follow thy Qiblah [way]; nor art thou going to follow their Qiblah; nor indeed will they follow each other's Qiblah. If thou after the knowledge hath reached thee, were to follow their (vain) desires, then were thou indeed (clearly) in the wrong; the People of the Book know this as they know their own sons; but some of them conceal the truth which they themselves know.** [2:145–46]

**Can ye (O ye men of Faith) entertain the hope that they will believe in you? – Seeing that a party of them heard the Word of Allah, and perverted it knowingly after they understood it.** [2:75]

Thus, God's messages to His Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) began in earnest, requesting him to deal with the issues Islam wanted to discuss with them [the Jews]. That is, they either respond to the call and start the debate or Islam takes the initiative to explore what they are up to, or they should shut up. This was what they did, in which case they had no escape from those issues, which came to haunt them and expose their real positions in the end.

The Qur'an made a point of addressing them with the description that connected them to the Scripture, suggesting that they were far removed from it and its injunctions. This is particularly so, when comparison is made between what people preach and what they practise.

We are not trying here to trace all the Qur'anic verses revealed in this regard; rather, to refer to some that reveal the general trends and common threads that run throughout the Islamic approach to dialogue:

**Say: 'O People of the Book! Do ye disapprove of us for no other reason than that we believe in Allah, and the revelation that hath com to us and that which came before (us), and (perhaps) that most of you are rebellious and disobedient?'** [5:59].

With amazement and bitterness it raises the question as to why they were revengeful and averse to the Prophet (s.a.w.) and his followers. Was it because they believed in God, His messengers and His Books, which were revealed to him and the other messengers, in whom the People of the Book believe? If that was the reason, how could this correspond to their adherence to the line of belief and their fight against the way of unbelief? Is this not a contradiction between what they call for and what they practise in reality? The Holy Qur'an dwells on the matter, leaving the questions begging for answers:

**No just estimate of Allah do they make when they say: "Nothing doth Allah send down to man (by way of revelation)": Say: "Who then sent down the Book which Moses brought: a light and guidance to man: but ye make it into (separate) sheets for show, while ye conceal much (of its contents): therein were ye taught that which ye knew not – neither ye nor your fathers;" Say: Allah (sent it down)": Then leave them to plunge in vain discourse and trifling.** [6:91]

## The approach exposes the Jews' historical complex

The style of these Qur'anic verses suggests that it intends to lay the Jews bare and discredit their stand by unfolding their past history and its relationship to their contemporary one, i.e. at the time of Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.). This is in order to familiarize the people with the nature of the complex they suffer from and which dictates the type of positions they take. The aim of this is to present the people with the conclusive evidence that they do not have anything in their doctrine to fall back on for that which they reject. Rather, they are driven by self-centred interest, with the aim of preserving their concessions, be they material or social.

It then seeks to make people aware of their crooked ways in deliberately confusing the truth with falsehood, falsifying truths, concealing the truth, and preaching what they do not practise. This is bound to put them on trial at all times and places. It is also bound to make them lose the trust that they endeavour to gain in order to carry out what they aspire to. The end result would be that people would be mindful of their deeds and words, lest they should be deceived by them.

The Qur'anic verses then divulge the intractability and unity of the Jews' position throughout history for they all sing from the same sheet. The later generation condones what the former one has done; thus, the moral responsibility is a joint one, because the present suggests the past. Imam Ali (a.s.) said, ***"What brings people together is pleasure or displeasure. It was one person who touched the she-camel of Prophet Saleh with evil; yet the entire people were subjected to God's torment, for they did not show displeasure for his heinous act"***[1]. This means that society is held responsible for what some of its members do, when the rest of its members condone the vile deeds of the few.

They do not want to accept that God sends down something to one of

[1]Nahjul Balagha, vol. 10, section 194, p. 261.

His creation, for this, to their mind, is not in keeping with the magnitude of the Message, or maybe they cannot comprehend it.

If this is the case, how can they justify the sending down of the Torah to Moses (a.s.)? Was he not a human being like Mohammad (s.a.w.)? Who sent it down? Was it not God? The answer has to be in the affirmative for they deal with the Torah, in the name of God, as though it were merchandise. Thus, they show what profits their business and conceal whatever may uncover their deception and disingenuous practises.

In the light of this answer the issue is in its natural context, in that it is possible that God sent down revelations to a human and that the human in question was Mohammad, the Prophet of God, to whom He revealed the Qur'an. Thus, the Qur'an leaves the issue to simmer, without trying to provide an answer, a silence that speaks louder than words, if they would discern it. God has said:

> **Say: "O ye that stand on Judaism! If ye think that ye are friends to God, to the exclusion of (other) men, then express your desire for Death, if ye are truthful!" But never will they express their desire (for Death), because of the (deeds) their hands have sent on before them! And God knows well those that do wrong! Say: "The Death from which ye flee will truly overtake you: then will ye be sent back to the Knower of things secret and open: and He will tell you (the truth of) the things that ye did!"** [62:6–8]
>
> **Say: "If the last home, with God, be for you specially, and not for anyone else, then seek ye for death, if ye are sincere". But they will never seek for death, on account of the (sins), which their hands have sent on before them. And God is well acquainted with the wrongdoers. Thou wilt indeed find them, of all people, most greedy of life, even more than the idolaters: Each one of them wishes He could be given a life of a thousand years: But the grant of such life will not save him from (due) punishment. For God sees well all that they do.** [2:94–96]

They allege that they are God's friends, that they are His chosen people, that they are the most favoured by God among all peoples, and that Heaven is theirs alone and Hell is others' destiny.

If this is so, the Qur'an asks them to sincerely seek for death because true believers love the life of this world insomuch as it benefits them to be closer to God, i.e. by doing more good deeds and asking forgiveness for

the wrongdoings they have committed. So, if a person is absolutely sure of success in the hereafter, what are they waiting for here? Why do not they go to Heaven?

Yet, they remain speechless. Since this is been the case, the Qur'an takes up the responsibility of answering on their behalf. They do not wish to die, for they will be held accountable for the crimes they committed – they unjustly killed the prophets, devoured illicit gains, branded the prophets liars, distorted the Words of God, and concealed His Book, etc. These vile deeds would turn their final abode into a nightmare; thus they hate death as much as they hate hellfire.

### Asking for the evidence

Nevertheless, the Qur'an does not leave this point to rest. It demands that they provide evidence for their claim, on the one hand, and to reiterate the criteria God has set for proximity, or lack of it, to Him and consequently earning His pleasure or wrath, on the other hand. The criterion is acting upon what He commanded and leaving out what He forbade, irrespective of whether you are Jew, Christian, or other. God has no special relationship with any of His creation. They are all the same in servitude before Him. The distinction between one and another is piety and good deeds, regardless of their status or lineage. This is brilliantly captured in the following verses:

> **And they say: "None shall enter Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian". Those are their (vain) desires. Say: "Produce your proof if ye are truthful".** [2:111]

> **(Both) the Jews and the Christians say: "We are sons of God, and His beloved". Say: "Why then doth He punish you for your sins? Nay, ye are but men, of the men He hath created: He forgiveth whom He pleaseth, and He punisheth whom He pleaseth: and to God belongeth the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and all that is between: and unto Him is the final goal (of all)".** [5:18]

The Qur'an is commenting on their claims, in that it is just wishful thinking, in the same way people make wishes in this world; yet, it is not necessary that such wishes come to fruition. This is because turning wishes and dreams into reality requires proof, which they do not have. It then follows that they are lying in what they are claiming.

As for the second verse, it is dismissive of their claim by posing the question as to why God punishes them for their sins, knowing that He

does not punish His friends and those He loves. Then God outlined the criterion for judging all people, which leaves no doubt that all are equal before Him in piety or impiety, and punishment or reward. God is the absolute arbiter in who is going to be punished and who is going to be rewarded, and none will have any concession outside the remit of His Will and Wisdom. To this general principle, the Qur'an, in its appeal to Muslims, has alluded:

> **Not your desires, nor those of the People of the Book (can prevail): whoever works evil, will be requited accordingly. Nor will he find, besides God, any protector or helper. If any do deeds of righteousness, be they male or female, and have faith, they will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them.** [4:123-24]

So, what will become of us in the hereafter is tied in with what we have done in this world, be it evil, which would keep the doer far away from God, or good, which would earn them a place near to Him. Thus, neither a helper nor a friend shall avail, regardless of their description or their importance, be they Muslim, Jew, or Christian. This is the fact and anything else is a mere dream that has no basis in reality or the truth.

## Criteria for truthfulness

> **Say: "O People of the Book! Ye have no ground to stand upon unless ye stand fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord". It is the revelation that cometh to thee from thy Lord, that increaseth in most of them their obstinate rebellion and blasphemy. But sorrow thou not over (these) people without Faith.** [5:68]

> **Ye People of the Book! Why do ye clothe Truth with falsehood, and conceal the Truth, while ye have knowledge?** [3:71]

In these two Qur'anic verses, a reference is again made to the Torah and the Bible. The followers of these two Books are simply requested to abide by their injunctions in their lives, if they are truthful in their belief in these Books. Otherwise, why do they not reveal their true identity and stop deceiving naive people in the way they disguise the truth by falsehood or conceal the truth they know full well, so that Muslims should not take it as evidence against them.

This is a new invitation to present the Torah and the Bible to the people to face up to the challenge in the same manner, if they were

truthful. Yet, the Qur'an hastens to add, in order to clarify the picture, what their true position is. That is, it is driven by arrogance and blasphemy for what God has revealed to Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.). The Qur'an then concludes that there is no benefit of reasoning with them on any subject because it will prove futile.

> **Say: "O ye People of the Book! Why obstruct ye those who believe, from the path of God, Seeking to make it crooked, while ye were yourselves witnesses (to God's Covenant)? But God is not unmindful of all that ye do". [3:99]**

The tone here is both bitter and threatening. The hope was that they should have affirmed the Prophet's Message by being among the People of the Book, in that they were conversant with that which had been revealed in it [the Book]. The opposite happened, i.e. they had turned into misguiding elements, doing their best to turn people away from treading the right path.

The Qur'an is asking for the reasons for this position, as though it desires to engage them in dialogue with a view to arriving at the truth. Yet, the remonstrative narrative is indicative of a desire to unsettle them by exposing their improper inherent position. God then declares that He is not unaware of what they do, in that He is Omniscient and that He will call to book all those who rebelled against His Will and defied His Messages, and punish them accordingly.

## False claims

> **Ye People of the Book! Why dispute ye about Abraham, when the Law and the Gospel were not revealed till after him? Have ye no understanding? Ye are those who fell to disputing (even) in matters of which ye had some knowledge! But why dispute ye in matters of which ye have no knowledge? It is God who knows, and ye who know not! Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian; but he was true in Faith, and bowed his will to God's (Which is Islam), and he joined not gods with God. Without doubt, among men, the nearest of kin to Abraham, are those who follow him, as are also this Apostle and those who believe: And God is the Protector of those who have faith. [3:65–68]**

What is clear from these verses is that the People of the Book were trying to misuse the name of Abraham and the high esteem in which the then Arab communities used to hold him, not least for being the builder

of the Ka'ba [the Sacred House in Makkah] and the prophet recognized by all religious persuasions, including the idolaters. Each group was trying to claim him as their own patriarch, be they Jew or Christian. The verse is unequivocal in rejecting those false claims, not least for the fact that both the Torah and the Bible were revealed at much later periods than the time of Abraham (a.s.), viz. how can one attribute a concept that appeared after him, to him?

The Qur'an, then, stresses that Abraham was Muslim, pure, and had nothing to do with associating others with God, a tendency that had tinged both the camps. The Qur'an then concludes that those who are more entitled to be his followers are they who submit to God – as so did he, Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.), and the believers. This is because their belief is based on true submission to God and is in keeping with the monotheism Abraham (a.s.) came to propagate.

The aim behind this clear-cut style is to paint a vivid picture for the matter, i.e. the authenticity and nature of Abraham's faith and that of Islam. It is the simple truth that interweaves with reality.

This tactic of laying claim to the following of holy men, may find echo in the positions of some contemporary trends, especially socialist Marxist ones. It has been suggested that the well-known Companion of the Prophet (s.a.w.), Abu Thar al-Ghifari, contributed to a type of Marxist ideology. In a way they tried to interpret his stand against the Caliphate of Othman and the governorship of Mu'awiya as having a bearing on Marxist ideology. It is noteworthy that Abu Thar was critical of Othman and Mu'awiya as a matter of principle, guided by the ideology of the Qur'an and its injunctions. Both the rules, i.e. those of Othman and Mu'awiya, were squandering God's [public] funds on relatives, friends and cronies. His slogan, in his revolt against deviation, was derived from Qur'anic verses such as:

> **And there are those who hoard gold and silver and spend it not in the way of God: announce unto them a most grievous penalty – On the Day when heat will be produced out of that (wealth) in the fire of Hell, and with it will be branded their foreheads, their flanks, and their backs, their flanks, and their backs – "This is the (treasure) which ye buried for yourselves: taste ye, then, the (treasures) ye hoarded!"** [9:34–35]

Yet, they found in this, and other positions, a revolt against capitalism

and a call to socialism. Thus, they set out to promote this notion on any forum where they could infiltrate the minds of the naive among people.

However, what is rather surprising is that some hypocritical clerics who were used to flattering the rulers had given legitimacy to this notion when they issued a statement, attacking Abu Thar in reply to using his name, with a view to protecting some famous and inviolable public figures against whom Abu Thar directed his revolt.[1] The authors of the edict also sought to cajole the then ruler, who was averse to any bright revolutionary idea shining in peoples' lives. This is even more so when such a notion draws on Islamic ideology and is deep-rooted in the history of some personages who invigorate peoples' faith and struggle against devious rulers. It is true that such an idea is surrounded by an aura of sanctity, and might give confidence to the masses to revolt against corrupt regimes that desire to grant themselves unwarranted inviolability and unnecessary security.

Had it not been for this gratuitous sycophancy shown to the ruler, they would have exposed the exploitation [of the name of Abu Thar] they were talking about, not least by revealing the fundamental differences between socialism in its ideological premises and Abu Thar's movement, which draws on Islamic ideology, which may concur, in some aspects, with socialism. That said, the two ideologies are dissimilar in more than one department, be it in form, content, or spirit. Those clerics could have at least made an attempt to deny the so-called relationship between this great figure and socialism, not least by pointing out the time gap between the two, so how could socialism be attributed to Abu Thar's thought?

There is a similarity between this contention and the debate between the Prophet (s.a.w.) on the one hand, and the Jews and Christians, on the other, about their claim that Prophet Abraham's thought belonged to them. Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) first started by giving due attention to the time lag between the two eras, that of Abraham (a.s.) and that of the Jews and Christians, and resting his case by stressing the true personal qualities of Abraham (a.s.), with a view to highlighting the differences between him and those who lay claim to his heritage, on the one hand and who Abraham's true followers are, on the other.

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[1]The Committee for Fatwa [religious edicts] in al-Azhar [Cairo, Egypt] issued a fatwa in 1367 H. (1948 CE) against a book, whose author claims that Islam has room for communism, relying on the revolt of Abu Thar -- May his soul rest in peace.

## The doctrine of the Holy Trinity

The Qur'an has raised with the Christians the question of Jesus Christ (a.s.) and his position vis-ä-vis the divine doctrine. It has chosen to discuss the question from the standpoint of true monotheism, which all the divine messages had proclaimed, including that of Christ. The Qur'an has desired to discuss the notion "Jesus is the Son of God" that they propound. It has taken issue with the Jews for claiming that Ezra is the Son of God:

> **The Jews call Ezra a son of God, and the Christians call Christ the son of God. That is a saying from their mouth; (in this) they but imitate what the unbelievers of old used to say. God's curse be on them: how they are deluded away from the Truth!** [9:30].

The Qur'an did not dwell long on Ezra's issue, as it was not as widespread. It made do with making reference to the fact that the claim was akin to that made by the unbelievers, and that it was not in keeping with the true faith that those people allege to relate to, not least by upholding the Book of God and His Law. The idolaters in the East and in the West were contributing to that school of thought. Turning to the argument with the Christians, who say, "Jesus is the Son of God", the Qur'an has relied on it as a basis for demolishing their claim, because it is diametrically opposed to the doctrine of monotheism, without going into the details.

Perhaps the research into the annals of history is not going to yield any credible and clear evidence as to the nature of the notion, which the Qur'an attributed to the Jews in their claim that "Ezra was the son of God". Does it follow the same Christian connotation of the phrase, which gives Jesus (a.s.) a divine quality or an extension of the Divine, or is there something of the essence of God in him? Or is it a metaphorical meaning, as in the phrase, **"We are the sons of God and His beloved ones", as a way of basking in the glory of being closer to God than others?**

The author of *al-Mizan fi Tafseeril* Qur'an [a Qur'anic commentary], as-Syyid Mohammad Hussain at-Tabatabaie, who raised this question, *"quotes some exegetes that the phrase, 'Ezra is the Son of God' was uttered by some Jews, not all of them, at the time of the Prophet (s.a.w.); and that it is similar to other statements, such as,* **'Truly, Allah is indigent and we are rich!' and 'Allah's hand is tied up'**. *Although some of them said these words, God has attributed them to the entire people, in that the others condoned*

*what some of them had claimed; they were all of the same opinion and vision".*[1]

However, it suffices to say that in its approach to refuting untrustworthy notions, the Qur'an sets forth from the premise of debating the issue, albeit an idea circulating among the people who advocate it without it forming a trend in their life. This is with the aim of warning people not to come too close for comfort, in its campaign to guide them to the right path.

It is noteworthy that the Holy Qur'an does not give any leeway whatsoever when it comes to matters relating to belief in God. Thus, it does not ignore any aspect thereof, regardless of whether the matter was widespread or of a limited influence in society, or whether it was big or small. If this proves anything, it proves that a great importance is attached to true belief, i.e. that which does not have any hint of deviation in it. This is so, because any misguided impression will reflect on the practice and consequently cause the progress of the Message towards its big goals in life to stagger.

This tendency should guide us through a showdown with contemporary ideological trends that try to play down the significance of all religious issues that are put forward in the context of belief. These trends try to dismiss such issues as irrelevant or insignificant, not worthy of dwelling on or discussing. They are trying to suggest that they should not be put on a par with other important issues of life.

In this regard, we are resolute in our position in recognizing the indivisibility of the doctrinal and practical aspects, on the basis of treating the doctrine as the foundation of what we practise, and the latter as an expression of the activity of the creed in life.

The Holy Qur'an has discussed the doctrine of Trinity, which Christianity considers as fundamental to its core belief, i.e. "Jesus is the Son of God", besides "the Father" and "the Holy Ghost".

On a different note, i.e. considering Jesus and his mother (a.s.) as gods worthy of worship, the Qur'an has this to say:

> **And behold! God will say: 'O Jesus the son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of God?' [5:116].**

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[1] at-Tabatabaie, *al-Mizan fi Tafseeril* Qur'an [a Qur'anic commentary], vol. 9 p. 254.

These thoughts cross-germinate, for prophecy, from this standpoint, does not contradict divinity. Rather, it gels well with the notion of Trinity, which considers the Son as though it were God. It maintains that God is inseparable from the Son on the basis of one God with [three] different forms, in a philosophical analysis that leaves you groping after a meaningful idea.

As is customary, Islam has been very clear in putting its case against this doctrine [Trinity]. It has done it in a way that is different from that advocated by the proponents of other doctrines, especially when they choose to wrap them in ambiguous semantics. This is in a deliberate bid to confuse the issues, so much so that they do not mind theorizing their doctrines on a base that is above human comprehension. They make it appear as though matters of belief should be dealt with outside the domain of the intellect, as some Christian philosophers and intellectuals wish to argue, when they talk about the doctrine of Trinity and how it relates to God's unity. They say that believing in this doctrine is paramount, i.e. believing comes first. The individual can then exert an effort to figure out what they believe in. Habib Sa'eed, the author of *Muqarantul Adyaan*, says in this regard, *"The person is not going to get to that stage of belief by way of theoretical debate; rather, by way of inspiration from God and a declaration from Him"*[1].

However, the Qur'an does not condone this method of attaining belief. In its reasoning it has relied on the rational way of thinking, which leaves room for examining the details of doctrine in critical judgement, such as the limitlessness of God or the clear impression of God's spirit. However, it goes hand in hand with man in these realms until he arrives at a conviction of a sort, be it belief or lack of it. Then, it declares a halt where the evidence has been found, not more and not less. Consequently, the Qur'an does not require man to believe before understanding what he is going to believe in, for belief becomes nonsensical if you are unable to discern its meaning – belief is light and ignorance is darkness.

For all this, the Qur'an has wanted the whole issue to be left to the intellect to critically examine the idea, and then come up with the verdict, for or against, according to circumstances and reasons.

Qur'anic arguments have focused on the comparison between these ideas and the humanness of Jesus (a.s.) in all his facets, on the one hand,

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[1]Habib Sa'eed, *Muqarantul Adyaan* [Comparison Between Religions], vol. 2, p. 118.

and the reality of the divine doctrine and the fundamental qualities of the Divine it represents, on the other hand. This is bound to leave man with a natural conclusion that the concept does not fit in with those doctrines.

It is the dialogue that moves in more than one field and takes more than one image, only to provide evidence of the fallacy of these notions, appealing to others to invoke in them a fighting spirit at some times, and a serene one at others. Sometimes it uses the reportorial style, which gives food for independent and straight thinking, away from preconceived ideas and influences.

Here and now, we are trying to look at the Qur'anic verses that have discussed Trinity in different shades:

> **O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: Nor say of God aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a Messenger of God, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in God and His Messengers. Say not "Trinity": desist: it will be better for you: for God is One God: Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is God as a Disposer of affairs.** [4:171]
>
> **They do blaspheme who say: God is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One God. If they desist not from their word (of blasphemy), verily a grievous penalty will befall the blasphemers among them. Why turn they not to God, and seek His forgiveness? For God is Oft- forgiving, Most Merciful.** [5:73–74]

This style starts with the concept that judges the doctrine from a standpoint where it ties in with the truth both in heart and tongue. Thus, there should be no room for going astray and advocating extremist views in religion.

In this light, it puts the idea forward, firm in the knowledge that Jesus son of Mary (a.s.) was the messenger of God. His mission in life was to convey that Message, like other messengers or prophets who were entrusted with such noble tasks, thus:

> **He said: I am indeed a servant of God: He hath given me revelation and made me a prophet; and He hath made me blessed wherever I be, and hath enjoined on me Prayer and Charity as long as I live; (He) hath made me kind to my mother, and not overbearing or unblessed.** [19:30–32].

However, Jesus (a.s.) is unique in one respect to the exclusion of all other prophets and people. His birth did not follow the normal pattern known to man. As the Qur'anic verse puts it, **"His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him".** This is so as to manifest His Omnipotence in bringing a human into being without a father, as He breathed His Spirit unto Adam before and made him into man with neither a father nor a mother. Thus:

> **The similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam, He created him from dust, then said to him: 'Be': and he was [3:59].**

Neither the "Word" nor the "Spirit" referred to in the Qur'anic verse are an expression of God in part or His Essence, because God is not corporeal so that He can be divided. Although His Essence is simple, it cannot move around. The two words are intended to manifest God's Omnipotence and the sublimity of His creation. His fashioning of Adam's inanimate body and breathing life into it is as simple as fashioning Jesus in the womb of his mother and breathing life into him, albeit through unconventional means. This is how the Qur'an tells the story of creating Adam (a.s.):

> **Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: 'I am about to create man from clay: When I have fashioned him (in due proportion) and breathed into him of My spirit, fall ye down in obeisance unto him'. [38:71-72].**

And this is what we read in the Qur'an of the story of Mary and her son (a.s.):

> **And (remember) her who guarded her chastity: We breathed into her of Our spirit, and We made her and her son a sign for all peoples. [21:91].**

As for describing Jesus (a.s.) as a "Word", it is because he came into being as a result of an order: Be, which represents His Will, without the interference of conventional means in the reproduction process through which other humans are born, although all are subject to His Will and creative acumen.

## The Qur'an appeals to human nature

Perhaps the disagreement between the commentators of the Qur'an concerning the two words, "Word" and "Spirit" stems from their own deduction from the Holy Qur'an, i.e. on the basis of the literal meaning of the two words. This is done at the expense of the general climate,

which governs the concept, a climate that gave rise to the Divine Will to rule supreme. In this case, they should have relied on inferring the meaning metaphorically, which can be understood as attestation to God's Spirit or a Breath of His Spirit, of course without losing sight of the yawning gap between the rhetorical expression and reality. You may look at it this way: a poet or an artist describing their poem or piece as part of their being, or something racking one's brain. This is a way of saying that one has exhausted one's energy in doing/performing/writing something. It is obvious, however, that this does not apply precisely to God's works, taking the literal meaning of the word, because, in His case, there is no meaning for the effort in creating something. Yet, it is embodied in the greatness of what is manifested in the created. Thus, the expression of breathing the Spirit into the body is used as a substitute for the Omnipotence of God, with which He creates whatever He likes and fashions whatever He fashions.

This is the description of Jesus (a.s.), which God wants the believers to emulate in their belief because it embodies true faith that is far removed from fanaticism and is in harmony with the nature of things. Through this, God calls upon them to believe in Him and His messengers and give up the doctrine of Trinity because it is in their interest for He is One, and He should be exalted above the claim that He has a son. That is, irrespective of how they understand the relationship, be it between father and son, which entails the existence of a wife, or what Christian theologians try to interpret it into, i.e. hypostasis: the one person of Christ in which the divine and human natures are united. All this is neither fair nor reasonable in His acclaim, as will be discussed. Thus, the Qur'anic verses that discuss Trinity link up with those verses that talk about the claim that God has a son, as in the previous verse and this one:

> **They say: "God hath begotten a son": Glory be to Him. Nay, to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth: everything renders worship to Him. To Him is due the primal origin of the heavens and the earth: When He decreeth a matter, He saith to it: "Be," and it is.** [2:116-17]

In its approach to refuting this notion, the Holy Qur'an has chosen to give greater attention to the Omnipotence of God and eliminating any anthropomorphic elements from Him; this is clear from the use of the phrase, **"Glory be to Him"**. The verse draws our attention to the fact that

He owns everything in the heavens and on earth and that everything renders worship to Him and yields to His Will. He does not need any help or support to create anything, no matter how great it is, only when He wills. This Will is expressed in the verb "Be", which is responsible for bringing things into being. So, if this is the case, will there be a need for making the son assume any connotation? And is there any meaning left for Trinity?

This reasoned approach is symptomatic of the Qur'anic general style of debate and protestation, in that it does away with complicating the argument. Rather, it advocates simplicity and clarity, which appeal to the unblemished nature of man. This is the right approach to attaining true faith; it is the approach that creates the right conditions for the human natural disposition to interact with the appeal in order to attain the truth from the shortest possible route.

That is why the Qur'an has chosen not to engage those people in a philosophical debate on the question of Trinity and Unity, which would have entailed hypothesizing. It stopped at reiterating the Unity that they recognize and is supported by clear proofs. It then forbade the belief in Trinity, branding those who uphold it unbelievers. That is because Trinity goes against the grain of monotheism, which rejects the divisibility of the one basic element of things as much as it rejects its taking multiple forms and structures. Divine monotheism does not have a bearing on any of these connotations.

It has left the judgement to human nature, without providing it with the criteria for such judgement. This is indicative of the Qur'anic approach, viz. of paving the way to the intellect and leaving it to decide whether to explore that road by walking it, with a view to achieving what man wants.

## Philosophical deliberation

Some Qur'anic commentators have attempted to subject the verse to philosophical argumentation. One of them goes about interpreting the verse by making each and every word in the verse as dealing with independent evidence of rejecting the notion of "the Son" and, consequently, disproving the doctrine of Trinity, which is based on that notion.

The summary of this interpretation is that there are two trends of belief in "the Son of God". One is the strand of opinion that relies on the

literal meaning of the word, i.e. what is common knowledge about begetting children. The philosophical trend relies on the metaphorical meaning of the word, i.e. the separation of part of the original entity, with neither physical disintegration nor time progression. This is what the Christians aim for in their claim that Christ is the Son of God, after subjecting the notion to some fine-tuning.

Agreeing with the first interpretation is not possible for a number of reasons:

It would turn God into a physical being, which He is not as He is above corporeality. Assuming that others can have absolute divinity and eternity would necessitate that in order to survive, everything would be dependent on Him for a start and continuity. So, how can one imagine a separate entity which is identical to Him, yet independent and acquiring both His essence and attributes without the need for Him? Is this not the assumption of the coming together of absolute divinity and finite one in one?

The attribution of the ability to beget children would require progressive action by Him, in which case the laws of matter and motion would govern him. This conflicts with the norm, as whatever is caused by His Will and Desire happens with neither a time limit for a decision, nor a division into phases.

The exegete at-Tabatabaie, the author of al-Mizan Qur'anic commentary, has this to say with regard to the interpretation of the above-mentioned verse:

*His words, in the holy verse,* **"May glory be to Him"** *are in reference to the first proof; His words,* **"to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth"** *are in reference to the second proof; His words,* **"To Him is due the primal origin of the heavens and the earth"** *are in reference to the third proof. Going along with the second interpretation is not ruled by the first argument, i.e. regarding the question of matter, corporeality, and progression. Rather, it contradicts the second protestation, i.e. the problem of identicalness, which requires outlining the absolute divinity for that which is supposed to be the Son of God; this needs further clarification in the context of the second interpretation, i.e. proving the Son and Father numerically, all by itself, which is a proof on abundance, although the qualitative unity between the Father and the Son is assumed; although son and father are one in human terms, yet more than one from a numerical*

*viewpoint. Accordingly, if the Unity of God is presupposed, everyone else, including the son, are not God only, but dependent on Him. So, the supposed Son of His cannot be God like Him. On the other hand, if it is argued that He has a Son who is identical to Him, but not dependent on Him, the unity of god becomes nonsensical*[1].

This was an outline of the concept.

As for the question of Jesus Christ, son of Mary (a.s.), it cannot be imagined on the same lines, even though, in itself, the notion is far-fetched. The concept of Son of God would tie in with the concept that he is God, as we have already asserted. So, how can we attest to him who has all the human qualities, precisely like any other human being?

The Qur'an has paid a lot of attention to making known the human qualities in Jesus (a.s.) from his birth to his ascent. It has elaborated on his conception to his birth and the difficulties he faced in his lifetime, especially as a physical being, getting affected by all that the human body can be affected by, which goes contrary to any divine nature.

His birth, which took place outside the natural laws and the miracles he performed, should not be deemed a proof of divinity in his person, because bringing Adam (a.s.) into being before him was unusual. Concerning the performance of miracles, it had occurred to the prophets before him, as both the Old and New Testaments tell us. That is, without any conclusion that Adam was god or the prophets were divine beings.

Now, let us explore the Qur'anic verses, which denounce the notion of divinity in prophecy; they lend support to the assertion that Jesus (a.s.) was a human being sent by God to His creation and gave him distinction over many of them:

> **Christ the son of Mary was no more than an apostle; many were the apostles that passed away before him. His mother was a woman of truth. They had both to eat their (daily) food. See how God doth make His signs clear to them; yet see in what ways they are deluded away from the truth!** [5:75]

The author of al-Mizan has this commentary on this verse:

> *Eating and drinking, to the exclusion of all the human acts, are being singled out here. The reason being that they serve as the best evidence*

[1]at-Tabatabaie, al-Mizan fi Tafseeril Qur'an, vol. 3, pp. 315–17.

*on the needs of physical beings, which is in conflict with divinity. It is evident that he who feels hunger and thirst naturally seeks to satisfy the need to take his fill of food and quench his thirst with drink. So, he is dependent on an outside power to satisfy his need. Consequently, does the divinity of such a person make sense? He is deficient in himself, being directed by others, and not an independent god. He is a mortal who is subservient to his Lord*[1].

**In blasphemy indeed are those that say that God is Christ the son of Mary. Say: "Who then hath the least power against God, if His will were to destroy Christ the son of Mary, his mother, and all every one that is on the earth? For to God belongeth the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and all that is between. He createth what He pleaseth. For God hath power over all things". [5:17]**

**Say: "Will ye worship, besides God, something which hath no power either to harm or benefit you? But God, He it is that heareth and knoweth all things". [5:76]**

**Christ disdaineth not to serve and worship God, nor do the angels, those nearest (to God): those who disdain His worship and are arrogant – He will gather them all together unto Himself to (answer). [4:172]**

**They do blaspheme who say: "God is Christ the son of Mary". But said Christ: "O Children of Israel! Worship God, my Lord and your Lord". Whoever joins other gods with God, God will forbid him the garden, and the Fire will be his abode. There will for the wrong-doers be no one to help. [5:72]**

The Holy Qur'an concludes in a projected dialogue between God and Christ (a.s.) on the Day of Judgement, as a means of proclaiming that these ideas are alien to the Message of Christ and his desire; and above all, they are alien to Christianity and Christ himself, thus:

**And behold! God will say: "O Jesus the son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, 'worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of God'?" He will say: "Glory to Thee! Never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, thou wouldst indeed have known it. Thou knowest what is in my heart, Thou I know not what is**

[1]Ibid. vol. 3, p. 317.

**in Thine. For Thou knowest in full all that is hidden. Never said I to them aught except what Thou didst command me to say, to wit, 'Worship God, my Lord and your Lord'; and I was a witness over them whilst I dwelt amongst them; when Thou didst take me up Thou wast the Watcher over them, and Thou art a witness to all things. If Thou dost punish them, they are Thy servant: If Thou dost forgive them, Thou art the Exalted in power, the Wise".** [5:116–18]

## Protestation by way of prayer

After the debate with the Christians had reached a dead end, the Prophet (s.a.w.) adopted a new way to reason with them. It was that of calling them to offer collective prayer, i.e. both the parties. This has been the subject of this Qur'anic verse:

**If any one disputes in this matter with thee, now after (full) knowledge hath come to thee, say: 'Come! Let us gather together, our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves: Then let us earnestly pray, and invoke the curse of God on those who lie!'** [3:61].

The story of this verse has been related through different sources, adhering to the main thrust of the verse, yet with slight variations. Here we are quoting the version of the traditionist Ali bin Ibrahim al-Qommi, in his Qur'anic Commentary, from Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.):

***He said: When the delegation of the Christians of Najran to the Messenger of God (s.a.w.) arrived and was received by him, their prayer time was due; so, they sounded the bells and started saying their prayer. The companions of the Prophet said to him: Do they do this in your mosque. He replied: Let them finish. Having completed their prayer, they approached the Prophet and said: To what do you call? He said: Bearing witness that there is no god but Allah and that I am His Messenger; that Jesus is an ordinary human being who goes about his affairs and needs, such as eating and drinking, like any other human. They said: Who is his father? At that moment Arch Angel Gabriel descended on the Prophet and said to him to ask them: What do you say of [the creation of] Adam. Was he a created man, who was eating, drinking, urinating and passing stool, and getting married? The Prophet asked them the question. They said: Yes. He said: Who is his father? They were dumbfounded. Then, God revealed these verses:***

**The similitude of Jesus before God is as that of Adam; He created him from dust, then said to him: "Be". And he was. The Truth (comes) from God alone; so be not of those who doubt. If any one disputes in this matter with thee, now after (full) knowledge hath come to thee, say: "Come! Let us gather together, our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves: Then let us earnestly pray, and invoke the curse of God on those who lie!"** [3:59–61]

***The Prophet then said: Then let us pray, and invoke the curse of God on those who lie; if I was truthful, the curse shall be your lot; and if I were a liar, the curse shall be my lot. They said: You are being fair. They agreed an appointment. However, when they returned home, their chiefs said: If he brings with him his people, he is not a prophet. Should he bring with him his immediate family in particular, we are not going to entertain his request for a joint prayer because he is not going to come to us leading his household, unless he is truthful. Come the following morning, the Prophet (s.a.w.) came together Ali, Fatima, al-Hassan, and al-Hussain (a.s.). The Christians said: Who are these people? They were told that they were his cousin, Ali, [his daughter] Fatima and his [grand] sons, Hassan and Hussain. They said to the Messenger of God: We give in; forgive us from taking part in this contest. Then, the Prophet signed a peace pact with them that they pay the poll tax'***[1].

On the subject we have been discussing, the importance of this story is that it serves as a very good example of the Islamic approach to dialogue. While it spares no effort in vigorously and robustly putting its case, it stands up to challenge the counter-argument. The verses demonstrate very clearly the extent of Islam's tolerance, which it wants its followers to practise with others, following in the footsteps of the Prophet, and from a position of strength not weakness.

Those Christians came to the Prophet to discuss the new religion, only to find how tolerant it was, so much so that they were allowed to say their prayer openly in the Prophet's mosque. The Prophet (s.a.w.) ignored the objections of some of his followers as to why he let them go about their

[1]Taken from at-Tabatabaie, al-Mizan fi Tafseeril Qur'an, vol. 3, p. 250.

worship in his mosque and asked them to leave them alone. He wanted to demonstrate to them in practice how Islam respects the feelings of others and their freedoms in the context of public order. He further wanted to assure and attest to them that he did not believe in force as a means to converting others to Islam against their will.

That was the way the dialogue was calmly conducted between the Prophet and the Christian delegation. Their questions were answered, and then counter-questions were put to them, just to perfect the proof of them and make them see the strength of his case.

The holy verses suggest that the debate was not limited to this aspect alone; rather, it was extended to cover all the areas of disagreement between Muslims and Christians in how each party regards Jesus (a.s.) and views the belief in him. That is so, because the verses discuss the disputation about him in a comprehensive manner. The verses and the general atmosphere of the story imply that those people did not want to budge, having engaged in a futile argument that led to nowhere. This had made the Prophet use another way with them, i.e. by challenging them to be adjudicated by God, who would eventually send His curse on the party who proved to be a liar. That was the Prophet's strategy of proving to them that he did not have anything to fear and that he was confident of the Islamic doctrine and the conceptions of the new religion. It is evident that the Prophet did not worry about putting himself in a difficult situation, in that he put members of his family before God in a dispute with others, calling down God's anger on the lying party.

However, he wanted to raise the tempo of the contest and induce confidence in others. That is why he did not put himself to the test alone; rather, he brought in members of his family to take part in the showdown. This was, as we have already mentioned, intended to instil confidence in the other party that he was truthful in his assertion. It is natural that any human being may take a risk with his own life, but not with those of members of his family.

The other party realized the implications of the issue. The situation filled their hearts with trepidation about going ahead with the competition, which might have led to unsavoury results for their side. That is, they would have ended up reeling under the curse of God, which would, in turn, have led to incurring His punishment and chastisement; thus, they opted for reconciliation.

## The lesson we draw from the approach

This incident should serve as a good lesson, in that the spiritual aspect of the faith, besides scientific and intellectual persuasive powers, should be used when Islam decides to conduct dialogue with its adversaries. This is based on the assertion that Muslim activists should take into account any factor that could contribute to influencing others in order to win them over to the side of the truth. Not only this, they should be given the confidence to see the strong side of this truth. This is a way of enduring in adverse and challenging situations and growing in confidence to face up to any confrontation no matter how intractable it may prove.

The Qur'an provides us with examples of this approach to dialogue. One such example is that of Prophet Mohammad's debate with the People of the Book when he called upon them to meet on a common ground, i.e., that which is shared between all divine messages, thus:

> **Say: "O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than God". If then they turn back, say ye: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (submitting to God's Will)".** [3:64]

The last segment of the verse, **"If then they turn back"** had come to sort out the position, after they turned down the invitation to come together and co-operate on matters of mutual interest. Among those is entertaining the Muslims' request to bear witness that there is no god but God, which should be the common thread that ran through their life and their relations with others. Showing preparedness that they respond to God's injunctions in word and practice is also called for. In short, no submission to anyone, save God. Others should prove the strength of their argument with evidence.

The importance of the psychological factor is that it creates the right conditions for others to see the strong undercurrent, which governs the ideology and calling in the context of dialogue.

# *Chapter IV*

# Dialogue Starting With a Question

## 1. The Prophet Poses the Questions

In the Holy Qur'an, we come across many verses which discuss doctrinal issues in detail. Many of these verses adopt the style of dialogue in which the Prophet (s.a.w.) plays a pivotal role. He may be found throwing questions before false conceptions on the faith and life held by some people. He may be seen confronting them with certain matters which they cannot deny or are not in a position to deny because they are not aware of their relationship with the right path of the faith. So, once reminded, their recognition would be a binding one, i.e. they should return to the right path. This would be as a result of the umbilical relationship between the two. Thus, the approach is that of appealing to their minds, with a view to rousing their innate nature to the call of truth. This would make any stubborn argument or haughtiness a futile attempt, especially with people who have self-esteem.

The following Qur'anic verses discuss this approach to dialogue:

> **If indeed thou ask them who has created the heavens and the earth and subjected the sun and the moon (to his Law), they will certainly reply, "God". How are they then deluded away (from the truth)? God enlarges the sustenance (which He gives) to whichever of His servants He pleases; and He (similarly) grants by (strict) measure, (as He pleases): for God has full knowledge of all things. And if indeed thou ask them who it is that sends down rain from the sky, and gives life therewith to the earth after its death, they will certainly reply, "God!" Say, "Praise be to God!" But most of them understand not.** [29:61–62]

> **If thou wert to question them, "Who created the heavens and the earth?" They would be sure to reply, "They were created by (Him), the Exalted in Power, Full of Knowledge" – (Yea, the same that) has made for you the earth (like a carpet) spread out, and has made for you roads (and channels) therein, in order that ye may find guidance**

**(on the way); that sends down (from time to time) rain from the sky in due measure – and We raise to life therewith a land that is dead; even so will ye be raised (from the dead) – That has created pairs in all things, and has made for you ships and cattle on which ye ride, in order that ye may sit firm and square on their backs, and when so seated, ye may celebrate the (kind) favour of your Lord, and say, "Glory to Him Who has subjected these to our (use), for we could never have accomplished this (by ourselves)". [43:9–13]**

It is obvious that these verses focus on conducting dialogue with those who claim there are partners to God, even though they recognize his Omnipotence and Control over things. Nevertheless, they fail to grasp the notion of the Divine Being. Thus, the style is that of posing the question to such people in terms of what they know about matters of belief in God. Their answers would then be the basis for elaborating on God's Omnipotence and His management of the affairs of the universe, and how everything that relates to human life or others is traced back to Him. The sought-after result would be that the polytheists would question themselves, realizing that they were in the wrong, without their being confronted face to face.

It may be deduced that although the holy verses have this common style, they vary as to the detail. Within the line of questioning, both the argument and counter-argument are presented so that thesis and antithesis are immediately recognized and the position taken, it is to be hoped, on the side of the truth. So, the Qur'anic good judgement makes use of confronting man with the truth head on, in order not to leave him any room to manoeuvre, fall back on the remnants of the past, or fumble about in the darkness of falsehood.

This mood is brilliantly captured in the following Qur'anic verses:

**Say: "Who is it that sustains you (in life) from the sky and from the earth? Or who is it that has power over hearing and sight? And who is it that brings out the living from the dead and the dead from the living? And who is it that rules and regulates all affairs?" They will soon say, "God". Say, "Will ye not then show piety (to Him)? Such is God, your real Cherisher and Sustainer: apart from truth, what (remains) but error? How then are ye turned away?" Thus is the word of thy Lord proved true against those who rebel: Verily they will not believe. Say: "Of your 'partners', can any originate creation and repeat it?" Say: "It is God Who originates creation and repeats it:**

**then how are ye deluded away (from the truth)?" Say: "Of your 'partners' is there any that can give any guidance towards truth?" Say: "It is God Who gives guidance towards truth, is then He Who gives guidance to truth more worthy to be followed, or he who finds not guidance (him self) unless he is guided? What then is the matter with you? How judge ye?" But most of them follow nothing but fancy: truly fancy can be of no avail against truth. Verily God is well aware of all that they do.** [10:31–36]

In these verses, the polytheists are confronted with the question about the universe and the perfect craft and fashion it exhibits, which point to the skilful Creator, who must be Omnipotent. Should their answer point in the direction of God, as is expected of them because they believe in Him, they would be asked again about the ability of those whom they called partners to Him to create the same or part thereof. The Qur'an takes up the responsibility of answering on their behalf for they will definitely be unable to provide an answer before the All-powerful God. They will turn their eyes around, only to ponder and then find none but God who can create all this magnificent universe. They will be left speechless, and, on many occasions, silence is much more meaningful than words.

The Qur'an then settles the argument, which exposes the shallowness of their beliefs. It adopts a harsher style, which is meant to send shockwaves down their spines and challenge their integrity. This is in an effort to argue the case for believing in the truth and genuine monotheism and for treating it as an indicator to the just cause of belief. Conversely, the issue of polytheism would serve as a case of straying from the right path and of falsehood. The latter is not worthy of espousal by any sensible person in the face of that which is self-evident. Thus, such a person should not leave the truth at the mercy of baseless conjecture.

## The approach in a lively faith

There is a need to espouse this approach of dialogue in this day and age, where Islamic activism comes face to face with certain elements that spare no effort in finding fault with Islam's aspiration to have a leading role in life. Thus, they shun Islam in favour of other ideologies under the pretext that they satisfy man's needs in this life and provide solutions for the intractable problems that are besetting humanity. However, they appear to forget that Islam is capable of providing such solutions and satisfying such needs. The Muslim activists can advance such issues,

using the same Qur'anic approach to dialogue, which discusses the subject matter in detail. Another course would be to compare Islam with the other ideologies, stressing what sets Islam apart from such creeds, in that it is far superior. This style could pave the way to either thought-provoking ideas to induce calm thinking or brainstorming.

There may also be a need for this approach in conducting dialogue across the sectarian divide, especially in the issues that involve giving preference to certain Islamic personalities over others, because of the sublime qualities of those people. We should, though, steer the dialogue clear of historical quagmires, lest they should overwhelm, and leave us with tunnel vision and sectarian inward looking, as is the case at present. This can be achieved by focusing on the general historical facts to serve as terms of reference for the dialogue, away from those events which deal with complex individual cases. This is so, in a bid to make the issue under discussion subservient to the main thrust of the opinion, with all the sentiments which it provokes and positions it imposes that serve the cause. Thus, disagreements on these issues might evaporate through this open and flexible approach, which would lead to loftier and open and outward-looking doctrinal thought.

The use of this approach should not, however, be confined to conducting dialogue on bygone Islamic personalities. Instead, there is a need for it to engage in dialogue to settle differences over our leaderships and public figures. In so doing, we should do away with our personal preferences, which normally colour our judgement of these figures, i.e. we should be objective in judging them. Otherwise, we would lose track of the approach we are adopting to solve the problem and settle the difference. This would inevitably lead us into a vicious circle.

Perhaps the most fitting Qur'anic verse serving this line of thinking is this one:

> **Say: "Of your 'partners' is there any that can give any guidance towards truth?" Say: "It is God Who gives guidance towards truth, is then He Who gives guidance to truth more worthy to be followed, or he who finds not guidance (him self) unless he is guided? What then is the matter with you? How judge ye?"** [10:35]

Thus, the verse has stressed the importance of keeping detached from all the relations, be they personal, familial, or regional, of the person being judged or appraised. Competence and erudition, which have a bearing on how the persons being judged, conduct themselves in the public domain, should be the criteria for judgement.

## 2. Others Ask and the Prophet Answers

In matters of dialogue, there is a problem facing those working in the way of God. It is that of bringing into debate certain subjects that have neither benefit nor relevance to the faith and life. Discussing such subjects is a form of intellectual luxury, which is concerned with prattle more than anything else. This is bound to turn the debate into a futile squabble. Examples of these topics are many, such as wrangling over the names of the mothers and fathers of the prophets, or the numbers of some groups of people whose stories are mentioned in the books of history or the Holy Qur'an. The Islamic dark ages witnessed such bickering over many matters which had no bearing whatsoever on religion or life. This meaningless bickering took its toll on the intellectual capacity of the people of those ages, so much so that they did not contribute anything useful to knowledge. This has reflected badly on the intellectual welfare of Muslims causing them to lag behind the convoy of life. That was the result of their abandoning what was beneficial to them and could have roused their spirit to go forward, to what was trivial.

There is truth in the following statement by Sheikh Mahmoud Sheltout, in his Qur'anic Commentary:

> *As for getting busy with pure theories, which do not yield any benefit for this life, nor a reward in the hereafter, the faithful, who are active in the service of Islam, should have nothing to do with them. They should not be involved in arguments, such as what would happen to the spirits when they depart the body? Where would they go? What are they going to do? They should also not ask about the grave's torment, i.e. is it confined to the dead body or will it cover both body and spirit? Is it going to happen to the body while in a state of liveliness or half dead? There should not be engagement in questions about the Scales of Justice? How the weighing process is going to be conducted? What is going to be weighed? What would the land and sky of paradise look like? And son on and so forth, which Muslims got bogged down with and many of their ulema filled their books with; thus, they diverted the attention of the masses from knowing what is good and acting upon it.*[1]

[1]Sheikh Mahmoud Sheltout's Qur'anic Commentary, p.559.

Some Qur'anic verses have referred to the position of Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) on some of the things his companions used to enquire about, and whose knowledge would not yield any tangible benefit. What he did in such situations was, sometimes to choose to ignore the question; at other times he directed it to something different. This was a deliberate way of reminding that they should feel duty-bound to ask about those aspects because it would profit them, and not what they asked about.

However, if need be, the debate should not go into details, leaving the way open to bringing the discussion to a close, for there is nothing to be served in going along with the other party in what they aim for.

As the Qur'an reports, the Prophet (s.a.w.) was asked about the ghost and the Day of Judgement. God Almighty did not wish to elaborate in answer to those questions, because both subjects are the exclusive domain of God's Omniscience. The soul in particular cannot be comprehended because it does not follow empirical rules. It comes to be recognized by the traces it leaves, or maybe coming to know about the spirit is not going to serve any purpose.

Here is the Qur'anic verse, which deals with the question about the spirit:

> **They ask thee concerning the spirit. Say: 'The spirit is of the command of my Lord: of knowledge it is only a little that is communicated to you, (O men!)'** [17:85].

The enquiries about the Day of Judgement have been discussed in a number of Qur'anic verses:

> **They ask thee about the (final) Hour – when will be its appointed time? Say: "The knowledge thereof is with my Lord (alone): None but He can reveal as to when it will occur. Heavy were its burden through the heavens and the earth. Only, all of a sudden will it come to you". They ask thee as if thou wert eager in search thereof: Say: "The knowledge thereof is with God (alone), but most men know not".** [7:187]
>
> **Men ask thee concerning the Hour: Say, "The knowledge thereof is with God (alone): and what will make thee understand? – Perchance the Hour is nigh!"** [33:63]
>
> **They ask thee about the Hour, "When will be its appointed time?" Wherein art thou (concerned) with the declaration thereof? With thy**

**Lord in the Limit fixed therefore. Thou art but a Warner for such as fear it. The Day they see it, (it will be) as if they had tarried but a single evening, or (at most till) the following morning!** [79:42–46]

The Prophet's job was not to tell those who asked to pin point the time of its arrival. Rather, his task was to warn them that it was inevitably coming so that they would prepare for it by doing good deeds. Moreover, determining the time of its coming does not serve the purpose religion aspires for in people's lives, in that they should be concentrating on the self-discipline that is precipitated by the fear of the consequences of evil-doing on the Day of Judgement. That is why God did not make the timing known to His Prophet, or to any other of his creation.

A hint of an unforgiving style can be detected in the last few verses, in that there is no mincing of words. The criticism is self-evident about the question. The reason seems to be that the answer is directed at those stubborn people for their insistence on repeating the question whose answer they already knew. The answer outlines to the questioners the tendency and the knowledge available in that regard. This made it incumbent on them to either shut up or ask again about the reasons for such a tendency. They were unyielding about asking the same question again, which means that their aim was not acquisition of knowledge. Rather, they were bent on wrangling and mischief making.

## Directing the dialogue to what enriches life

We come across examples of the questions they were raising for certain reasons, when the Prophet (s.a.w.) chose to answer differently, i.e. not to their liking. The Prophet's aim was to direct them to the sort of questions they should be putting to him, as has already been mentioned.

He was asked about the birth of the moon and the phases it goes through from being born small to growing bigger and going back to being a crescent. It was apparent that they were not interested in gaining knowledge in the field of astronomy. Going into detail about this topic would have required treading in a minefield of specialist knowledge that would certainly have been beyond their comprehension. In addition, it would have made no difference to their lives. Instead, the main thrust of his reply was to delve into the practical benefits to be reaped from the phenomenon of the moon's birth and rebirth. It is there for them to serve as a calendar. Among other things, it is there to make them determine the time for their pilgrimage (*hajj*). The lunar calendar is simple, for it does

not need anything other than sighting the moon to start the month and finish it, a process that is familiar to all.

The Holy Qur'an used a metaphor to urge man to address the issues directly rather than through the backdoor, thus:

> **They ask thee concerning the new moons. Say: "They are but signs to mark fixed periods of time in (the affairs of) men, and for Pilgrimage. It is no virtue if ye enter your houses from the back: It is virtue if ye fear God. Enter houses through the proper doors: And fear God: That ye may prosper". [2:189]**

They asked the Prophet (s.a.w.) as to what they should spend in charity. In his answer, he chose to focus on those people on whom they should spend it, just to remind them that this was what they should have asked about, because it is not so important as what to spend. Rather, whom to spend it on:

> **They ask thee what they should spend (in charity). Say: 'Whatever ye spend that is good, is for parents and kindred and orphans and those in want and for wayfarers. And whatever ye do that is good, God knoweth it well'. [2:215].**

In another Qur'anic verse, the answer does not contain a reference to the type and quantity of things they should give away in charity; it uses one word [*afu* in the Arabic text], i.e. **"What is beyond your needs". "They ask thee how much they are to spend; Say: 'What is beyond your needs'". [2:219].**

The Qur'an tells of what Muslims and others used to discuss in detail about the number of the People of the Cave. Argument erupted between Muslims when, it so appears from the import of the verse, they wanted to involve the Prophet in providing the decisive answer to settle the argument:

> **(Some) say they were three, the dog being the fourth among them; (others) say they were five, the dog being the sixth, doubtfully guessing at the unknown; (yet others) say they were seven, the dog being the eighth. Say thou: "My Lord knoweth best their number; it is but few that know their (real case)". Enter not, therefore, into controversies concerning them, except on a matter that is clear, nor consult any of them about (the affair of) the Sleepers. [18:22]**

In its discourse, the Holy Qur'an aims to put the issue in perspective. That is, knowledge about the number of that band of people is not as

important as the lessons that should be drawn from their story. The significance of the story of the People of the Cave is in its religious connotation. Here we have a group of young men who did not give in to the pressures to renounce their belief, but found a safe haven from the excesses of their people in the cave. God Almighty had sheltered them in His Grace. He made the way they lived their life and what had become of them a miracle and a moral to be pondered by other people through time.

That aspect of the story is what the faithful should concern themselves with. Knowledge should be a means to a better spiritual life, not one to satisfy one's curiosity about the unknown. Accordingly, there will be no benefit gained from knowing their number or personal qualities. This is because it does not pose a problem that requires a solution. The moral of the story God wants us to reflect on is that there is no harm in ignorance in matters that would serve no purpose, because it has no bearing on the balance sheet of good and evil, or proper and improper conduct. It went on to direct the Prophet to keep away from engaging in debate on this topic and ordered him not to **"consult any of them about (the affair of) the Sleepers"**, just to counsel others that they should not ask about these things.

Thus, the Islamic rationale behind dialogue is clear. Man should not take to wrangling on every subject, lest the whole exercise turn into a wasteful and meaningless effort. Muslim activists should endeavour to be in charge of the situation by closing the door on any topic where all the signs indicate that it is not going to yield any conclusive result. Instead, the dialogue should be directed to those areas that would benefit the faith and enrich life.

## The required wisdom

In the activity of dialogue, which the Qur'an talks about, there is an important aspect in the context of the questions the prophets used to face and the answers they used to provide to those questions.

This point relates to the subject being raised by the adversaries of the faith within a dialogue setting. It may touch on topics that are viewed with sensitivity by society. Thus, bringing them to the fore may create incensed reactions that may contribute to aborting the aim of dialogue. This could be detrimental to conducting dialogue on these issues and the positions taken thereof, resulting in freezing the activity of true faith in life, by virtue of demagogic atmospheres created by discussing such issues

It is desirable that Muslim activists should be tactful enough to bring the curtain down on dialogue on such sensitive subjects, without departing the ideological line they follow or stirring up adverse sentiments. This is the moral that can be learned from the following Qur'anic verse, which talks about some sensitive issues Pharaoh deliberately wanted to bring to the fore to the disadvantage of Moses (a.s.). The aim was to inflame popular feelings against Moses:

> **(Pharaoh) said: 'What then is the condition of previous generations?' He replied: 'The knowledge of that is with my Lord, duly recorded: my Lord never errs, nor forgets'. [20:51-52].**

It may be inferred from this verse that Pharaoh's question to Moses (a.s.) about the previous generations, i.e. the forefathers of the people at his time, was intended to make Moses brand them unbelievers, or that their lot would be hellfire, etc. This was bound to inflame the feelings of their offspring, who could have revolted against him, in revenge for what they perceived as an insult to their ancestors. Pharaoh's aim could have been different, in that he might have attempted to divert the attention to something else other than the main topic of the debate, i.e. the issue of belief and unbelief. However, Moses (a.s.) ruined his plans by closing the argument, which Pharaoh intended to manipulate or deflect its main thrust. Moses (a.s.) left their affair to God who is aware of their situation, as neither he nor Pharaoh had any knowledge about their circumstances to talk about.

In this day and age, Muslim activists may face many situations of the same type. Some people often confront them with political, social, or personal issues, which are intended to create tension in the ranks of the masses. Those sorts of people also try to create conditions that are conducive to arguing emotive issues. This is a deliberate attempt to turn the activists away from their main objective. Sometimes the opponents try to play down the significance of the issues being discussed by trivializing them and narrowing them down to a mere detail, in a bid to complicate matters for the activists.

It is wiser to avoid being dragged into such futile arguments by leaving matters to God, as to Him belongs dominion on the Day of Judgement, invoking the domains of His all-encompassing Mercy where man's decisive future in the hereafter is concerned. The general principles of reward and punishment, and consequently securing a place in heaven or hellfire, should be highlighted. Punishment should be construed as a kind

of dispensation of justice. By the same token, pardon should be viewed as a gesture of goodness, mercy, and forgiveness. This may contribute to bringing equilibrium to the situation, on the one hand, and keeping the relationship with God, on the other hand. This should, of course, be an honest endeavour, not to permit belief in God to turn into a justification for abdicating responsibility or an excuse for wrongdoing.

The Prophet (s.a.w.) faced some legal matters that Muslims and others were used to ask about, for they had a bearing on their day-to-day life. Some of these were traditions deep-rooted in their psyche, such as drinking alcohol and gambling. Some were practices that had attained the status of being sacred, which they could not violate, such as going to war in the sacred months, i.e. Rajab, Thul Qi'dah, Thul Hijja, and Muharram.

The answer of the Prophet (s.a.w.) was in keeping with general Islamic understanding, which recognizes that acquiring knowledge in any field is a natural right for all men and women. Anyone has the right to ask about anything pertaining to the faith and its laws. Religion in return has to provide windows of knowledge on any particular issue being enquired about. They have come to deliver people from darkness to light. Thus, they should take the people out of the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge.

## Muslims ask about alcohol and gambling

The people at the time of the Prophet (s.a.w.) asked about alcohol and gambling, which were deep-rooted in society. Banning them outright would have created a major social problem. The people were under the illusion that prohibition did not go hand in hand with what was in the interest of the people. That is, consumption of alcohol would lighten the weight of the soul, transporting it away from its miseries. They might have felt the need to drown their sorrows and problems in a world that, they thought, was trouble-free. They might have perceived it in the same light as sleep, which can provide a rest where the nerves cool down and the batteries are recharged.

In its response, the Holy Qur'an did not try to dismiss these perceptions, nor was it harsh in pointing out the legal injunctions in that regard. Instead, it started in delineating the negative as well as the positive aspects, leaving them ample room to weigh things up for themselves in peace. This is the right way to ensure the safety of

knowledge from being corrupted under the weight of custom, tradition, interest, or whim, thus:

> **Satan's plan is (but) to excite enmity and hatred between you, with intoxicants and gambling, and hinder you from the remembrance of God, and from prayer: will ye not then abstain? [5:91].**

Thus, it confronts them with the negative impact of intoxicants and gambling on both personal and social levels, let alone their effect on the spiritual side, especially when people are in audience with God in worship. That is because alcohol affects the capacity of thinking straight, making man behave under the spur of his base instincts. In another way, acting under the influence of alcohol is symptomatic of letting loose one's anger and enmity subconsciously. Gambling contributes to stirring up, in the heart of the losing party, animosity against the winning side. Both alcoholism and compulsive gambling are instrumental in creating a breakdown in the relationship between man and God when they get distracted from remembrance and saying prayer. That is why the Qur'an has put the question in an exclamatory form, asking people to desist from dabbling in these bad habits: **"will ye not then abstain?"** In this, there is a suggestion to sensible people that they should not need outside intervention to make them get rid of that which spoils their lives.

The Qur'an then attempts to compare the minuses and pluses of both alcohol and gambling in the minds of people at the outset. No sooner has this been done than it hastens to add that the minuses outweigh the pluses. What is left is for sensible people to reach a conclusion that would be on the side of prohibition. This is so, because the intellect would not accept man committing something that would harm his well-being for a benefit that is much less than the harm it causes.

Should you ask: how could this come about? The answer is that although intoxicants may provide some benefits, they are minimal compared to the incalculable problems they create. Damage to health and social problems top the list of the negatives. They come about as a result of people involved in these practices taking leave of their senses. The results manifest themselves in crime and malpractices. Society has no protection against a drunken person as they cannot lock them up, thus preventing them from wreaking havoc on their fellow human beings, be it by causing traffic accidents or committing homicide. These are the consequences of drunkenness.

As for gambling, there may be other problems besides those mentioned in the Qur'anic verse. Dangerous social malaise is symptomatic of a trend when the compulsive gambler relies on gambling to earn his living. This would reflect badly on society, as it would lose some of its productive capacity through the loss of some of its members to gambling. On the family front, the gambler would destroy himself as well as the well-being of his family.

Thus, the process of weighing the loss and profit ends up in sustaining high losses, for minimal profit. The Qur'an puts forward before the people the truth which they have overlooked, and reiterates to them that drawing the boundaries between what is licit and what is illicit does not stem from nonsensical play or getting gratification from what people perceive as constraints on their freedom and limits on their choices. Rather, the process of legislating for what is permissible and what is not emanates from man's interest, be it personal or public. There is, therefore, no prohibition, unless the disadvantages outweigh the advantages; a particular act is only sanctioned when the reverse is true. That is, regardless of whether or not people have got used to practising something, in that the freedom in Divine lawmaking is not whimsical. It is realistic, in that the vital interest of, or detriment to, life and man is the driving force behind it.

In this light, the Holy Qur'an has not elaborated on highlighting this reality with regard to the consumption of alcohol and taking to gambling. It has not said what they should do; rather, it has left the matter to man's clear conscience to reach a conclusion about the Islamic ruling prohibiting intoxicants and gambling, decisively, thus:

> **They ask thee concerning wine and gambling. Say: 'In them is great sin, and some profit, for men; but the sin is greater than the profit'.** [2:219].

## Muslims ask about fighting during the Sacred Month

The people asked Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) whether they could go to war during the sacred month. The question was precipitated by an incident where some Muslims and idolaters were involved in a fight. The Muslims killed an idolater and took two prisoners. Quraish exploited the incident to speak ill of the Prophet. The Muslims who were involved in that incident were distressed because they thought that they had done a vile deed [in violating the sanctity of the sacred month], especially as they

noticed that the Prophet was averse to this; and the rest of their fellow Muslims criticized them for it. Thus, a controversy was in the making. So, they were left with no alternative but to put the case to the Prophet to adjudicate. And this was the Qur'anic answer:

> **They ask thee concerning fighting in the Prohibited Month. Say: "Fighting therein is a grave (offence); but graver is it in the sight of God to prevent access to the path of God, to deny Him, to prevent access to the Sacred Mosque, and drive out its members". Tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter.** [2:217]

It seems that the matter baffled the believers, in the wake of that incident, thinking that Islam did not recognize the principle of the sanctity of the sacred months, in that it rejected the ban on fighting during these months. Thus, they were under the impression that Islam was going to license fighting therein, especially as the Prophet did not apprehend or punish those Muslims who killed the idolater and took two of his companions prisoner. Their question was to know the right ruling in the matter, so that they could confront the smear campaign waged against Islam firm in knowledge and sincerity.

The answer came unequivocally, in that it upheld the ban on fighting during the Month, viewing it as denying "access to the path of God" and His worship. However, it hastened to add that what Quraish had done was even worse, in that they drove out the people of the Sacred Mosque, not for anything but for bearing witness to the word of belief, in an attempt to cause them to turn their back to their faith. Then, it laid the solid foundation for the principle, which treats luring people away from religion and forestalling its progress as much worse than killing. This is because killing is an individual act whose consequences are limited, in the main, whereas enticing the adherents of religion to leave it in droves would prove detrimental to the whole group.

Seditious acts are concerned, directly or indirectly, with defending the crooked path of atheism and idol worship against the straight path of faith and monotheism, and with undermining the truth. For this reason, the Muslims who were involved in that incident were not considered as acting outside the remit of the faith, because their aim was to dismantle the stumbling blocks that were installed in the way of Islam to prevent it from forging ahead. Thus, the consequences of their action were far greater than the act of killing itself, i.e. violating the sanctity of the sacred month.

It can be inferred from the Holy Qur'anic verse that it is not trying to say that Muslims were to blame. Contrary to what some Qur'anic commentators have deduced we believe that it is trying to put the act of those Muslims in its legal framework, i.e. rooting out unbelief. It reiterates sticking to this way and lending it legitimacy, as is evident from the last part of the verse:

> **Nor will they cease fighting you until they turn you back from your faith if they can. And if any of you turn back from their faith and die in unbelief, their works will bear no fruit in this life and in the Hereafter; they will be Companions of the Fire and will abide therein. Those who believed and those who suffered exile and fought (and strove and struggled) in the path of God, they have the hope of the Mercy of God: And God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.** [2:217–18]

It is noticeable that the verse is comparing the practices of both camps, i.e. those of unbelief and belief. The former confronts the Word of God with rebellion and aggression, whereas the latter receives it with humility, fleeing to Him and waging jihad in His cause. Thus, it can be construed that the verse is in the business of rewarding those Muslims for what they did, especially their breaking the ban on entering the Sacred Mosque. On the other hand, it is reprimanding those unbelievers for the crimes they had committed and for their dishonest practices. However, it should not be understood that the phrase **"worse than slaughter"** indicates that there is some kind of equality in apportioning blame between the two parties, and giving more of it to the unbeliever. Rather, it is mimicking their claim in putting the responsibility for violating the sacred month squarely on the shoulders of the Prophet (s.a.w.) and Muslims in general. One should not read in the phrase **"they have the hope of the Mercy of God"** evidence of admitting responsibility, because hoping for God's mercy is not confined to looking for mercy when the worshipper commits a vile deed. It is the kind of supplication that is engaged into in seeking His favour, grace, and reward. We aspire for God's mercy to forgive us our trespasses, as much as we look forward to His reward after a commended act of worship. This is so that He may elevate our stations. Describing the believers as fleeing to God and waging jihad in His cause is indicative of our reading of the verse. Yet God knows best. The importance of this answer is that it is in response to enquiries by the believers, including those that may suggest rejection. It has handled them with the expected calmness of the Message, its realism,

and its faith in the power of knowledge that permeates all aspects of the Law. This is worthy of turning the Muslim activists into ones who can understand the narrative, principles, and teachings they try to propagate. They are not parrots, which mince words and pay them lip service.

## Practical outcomes of the approach

This approach provides some good experience, which may guide the steps of Muslim activists in life:

### 1. Knowledge of the rationale of divine law strengthens belief

People have a natural right to pose any kind of questions to Muslim activists. The activists should not complain in any way about the number of questions, their nature, or complexity. They should not duck any question. They should bear in mind that their responsibility in life is to carry the Message and impart it. Thus, they should discharge it to the best of their ability, without letting their own personal choices or inclinations colour their conduct or judgement.

In the dark ages, and it still is the case, religious activity has been blighted by some unenthusiastic religious scholars, who think that their fundamental duties are those concerned with personal status affairs, such as matrimony, divorce, prayer, death, and other articles of faith. They answer briefly the questions put to them, as though they are not in the mood to expand on them. This is particularly so when the questions touch on the philosophical aspect of the religious laws and precepts, their rationale, benefits, and secrets. They have no defence against the criticism apart from saying: people have to accept God's injunctions with neither objecting to them, nor understanding the reasons underlying the judgements. They quote the following verses in support of their argument:

> **It is not fitting for a Believer, man or woman, when a matter has been decided by God and His Apostle to have any option about their decision.** [33:36]
>
> **But no, by the Lord, they can have no (real) Faith, until they make thee judge in all disputes between them, and find in their souls no resistance against Thy decisions, but accept them with the fullest conviction.** [4:65].

Yet, what they seem to forget is that the general ambience of the verses is that of urging the believers to submit to God's commands and

prohibitions and accept His decisions, even if they go against their own wishes and interests.

The verses do not contain any reference to enquiring about the rationale of the judgement, the viewpoint from which it was reached, or its benefit, let alone censuring the question into those areas. On the contrary, it could be said that, in the varying Qur'anic style, one can detect a licence to do just that. That will be in an effort to convince people that Islamic lawgiving is based on solid foundations, which takes into consideration the fundamental interests of man in life. It also seeks to make people reflect on this, so that they can achieve clarity of vision that would enable them to evaluate Islam and other ideologies. This is not going to be achieved unless one gets to grips with the rationale of the law and the benefits derived from it.

We have noticed this trend in many Qur'anic verses that discuss legal judgements, such as:

> **Do not marry unbelieving women (idolaters), until they believe: A slave woman who believes is better than an unbelieving woman, even though she allure you. Nor marry (your girls) to unbelievers until they believe: A man slave who believes is better than an unbeliever, even though he allure you. Unbelievers do (but) beckon you to the Fire. But God beckons by His Grace to the Garden (of Bliss) and forgiveness, and makes His Signs clear to mankind: That they may receive admonition.** [2:221]

We can clearly see that the verse ended with stating the legal basis for the judgement, i.e. the dissimilarity between the believers and polytheists in each party's outlook, conduct, and aim, which would influence matrimonial life that should be governed by compassion and understanding; its common denominator is unity of perception, feeling, and aim. The believers respond to God's call to heaven, which would require a particular type of conduct and thinking; this is at odds with the polytheists' call to hellfire. So, how is faithfulness to matrimonial life going to be achieved with the disparity in the spiritual, ideological and living obligations required by belief? It may appear to us that the verses have not made the basis for prohibiting marriage arbitrary, as some may make out of them. It has been made permanent, even if it meant that it goes against people's wishes. It has tried to guide the steps of people into weighing sentimental inclination against the realistic interest of both faith and life.

The verse concludes that personal inclinations are not significant compared to the fate of man in this world and in the hereafter:

> **Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means"** [4:34].

It is clear from the verse that God has not stopped at pronouncing the judgement that man is the provider of the family. He went further into giving the reasons for the ruling. Preferring one to the other is because (a) the man is stronger than the woman, both physically and mentally, and (b) the man is responsible for winning the family's bread.

**"Nor come nigh to adultery: for it is a shameful (deed) and an evil way".** [17:32]. In this Qur'anic verse the justification for prohibiting adultery and fornication is self-evident: **"It is a shameful (deed) and an evil way"**. That is, both socially and spiritually.

**"Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: And God is well acquainted with all that they do".** [24:30]. Here, lowering their gaze and guarding their modesty have been anchored on spiritual as well as physical ritual purity, as is evident from the phrase, **"greater purity for them"**.

> **"O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful".** [33:59].

In this Qur'anic verse, reference is made to the rationale behind the command for the wives and daughters of the Prophet and the wives of the believers to go about covering themselves up in a particular way. The aim is to avoid putting themselves in harm's way. The ruling is there, and so are the reasons for it. This is done to assure women that the aim is to preserve their integrity and comfort. As has already been mentioned regarding intoxicants and gambling, the Islamic approach to calling people to embrace the faith attaches great importance to the subject of making matters known to people.

We present all these Qur'anic verses, and others, to those who do not want to make an effort to understand them, on account that God's injunctions should not be subjected to people's comprehension. As the tradition (*hadith*) from the Progeny of the Prophet (a.s.) goes, ***"The***

***religion of God is done disservice to, not only by feeble minds, but also by false opinions".*** This should not put us off seeking to understand the injunctions, on the one hand, and coming closer to gaining insight into the benefits of these injunctions, should it prove difficult to fathom the reasons for them, on the other hand. That effort should serve the pursuit of knowledge in the Law, which would give the believers confidence in it, instead of remaining a source of worry and bewilderment that could threaten the innermost soul with that which could cause it to stray from the right path.

We can attribute the reasons for the intellectual inertia that is besetting Muslims, on the level of understanding Islam, to this inflexible approach of the official representatives of religion, when they close the wide-open door of religious knowledge to Muslims.

What seems to complicate matters is that some of those ulema assume that belief is some sort of inspirational intellectual power that is capable of granting the believers the ability to do away with all matters of suspicion and scepticism, solve all their problems, and make them face up to all challenges they may encounter. Thus, they do not allow the believers to speak about the doubts and unsettling notions that may linger in their minds. They gag them from discussing thought, creed, and injunctions under the pretext that the believers should not be asking about certain things. They consider interest in these matters as a form of heresy, atheism, or blasphemy. This is bound to scare the believers away from raising the types of questions that keep haunting them, and, consequently, lead them to more perplexity and uncertainty, or maybe harbouring more doubt, if not blasphemy and atheism.

We do not find this in the Qur'anic approach to dialogue with either the unbelievers, or the believers, for that matter. It cannot even be found in Prophet Mohammad's style of reasoning with his followers. It has been related in the Prophetic biography that a man came to see the Prophet (s.a.w.) and said to him:

> ***O Messenger of God! I have gone astray. The Prophet could tell what his problem was, retorting: Did he [Satan] haunt you, saying: who created you? And you said: God. He then said: Who created God? The man said: Ye, O Messenger of God!***

That man lived with devastating uncertainty with that thought, so much so that he was under the impression that his faith had been shaken.

The prophetic position was in keeping with the main thrust of the Message, which seeks to remove doubts and uncertainties, and handle complex issues. ***"The Prophet (s.a.w.) said to the man towards the end: This is the true belief".*** Thus, he turned calamity into prosperity, and apprehension into peace of mind and security.

## 2. The value of thought is in its practical results

Steering the approach to education towards the practical side, in the context of what people enquire and gain knowledge about, is an essential matter, due to the fact that pure theoretical issues cannot serve the purpose of life either directly or indirectly. This is true of many other issues that come under the banner of futile curiosity. Efforts put into them are useless and a waste of time. The value of thought is in what practical benefits, and related theoretical aspects, it can yield for man in this life and the hereafter.

The educational approach we can glean from the holy verses, which have done away with the questions that cannot yield any benefit in favour of those that are beneficial, is a clear proof of the extent of the relationship between pursuit of knowledge and life. Knowledge that is far removed from life is akin to death. This approach to education is capable of leading the Islamic society to focus more on the practical side of things, even in ideology, so that it can free it from the shackles of the times of decadence, which made the Muslim mentality and style slaves to the theoretical aspect of things. The situation is so acute that Muslims spend considerable time arguing over semantics, for no good purpose, but only to kill time, so much so that the field of linguistic intricacies and interpretations has become an art in its own right.

Some people may wish to argue that simple and direct expressions of thought would detract from the integrity and stature of science and knowledge. Thus, scientific research in juridical issues has entered the doldrums of ambiguous and far-fetched theories and opinions. They seek to be apologetic about this by saying: Presupposing the impossible is not impossible, and this process is capable of sharpening the wit and opening new horizons for it. However, they seem oblivious to the fact that in so doing they squander the opportunity, for themselves and the majority of people, of exploring the practical aspects, which are the real test for the people. They do not seem to pay due attention to those practical aspects of Islamic jurisprudence, which call for coming closer to reality and the

suppositions that are likely to prove worth their while, for this is the way to solving people's problems in life.

As for dissecting the brain and widening its capacity to discern things, this can be left to disciplines such as mathematics and philosophy.

### 3. It is essential to get to grips with practical rulings

We find in this educational approach guidance to people to attain advanced levels of practical legal education in the branches of religion, such as acts of worship and transactions. This is so, as the individual Muslim would be secure in the knowledge that his going about his private life and the conduct of his affairs fall in line with the correct Islamic path. This would ensure that, in this context, Islam's practical role would remain a force in people's individual lives. They would feel its presence in their lives, albeit it has been forced out from social life altogether.

This guidance could take two approaches:

(a) Direct religious instructions imparted in circles, seminars, schools (private and public), and calling on people to attend and gain more knowledge in religious matters.

(b) Encouraging people to ask about legal rulings on each and every sphere of life, to the extent that such rulings become the believers' main concern in the smallest and the biggest of issues.

You may find all this discussed in many Qur'anic verses, by way of question and answer, as has already been discussed, especially arousing the interest of people in knowing about the injunctions and drawing satisfaction from the knowledge of their benefits.

While we are making reference to this point, we are trying to do away with what has become commonplace with those working for the Islamic cause and others. They seem to have lost interest in imparting religious legal rulings in the conventional way. On the other hand, they appear to attach more importance to teaching general Islamic principles, social and political concepts and others. This has led the majority of Muslim activists to be illiterate or semi-literate in the knowledge of the practical rulings, and far away from the main guidelines.

We recognize the danger of this tendency because it is liable to leave a vacuum in the arena, as a result of the dearth of believers among the adherents to the practical line of Islam on minute issues. This will be at the expense of finding the alternative, i.e. devout Muslims, who can

combine the desire and resoluteness to remain faithful to the ideological line that Islam has drawn for life, and the practical application of the principles in private as well as in social life.

The need for pristine open-minded Islamic thought should not be less pressing than active religious work deep in the conscience and in life. That is because the ideology provides the way to live Islam in real life, while religious work secures the free movement of Islam within the procession of life. Each has its own role, scope and benefit. No matter how weak one of them may become, the other should reinvigorate it.

### 3. The Prophet Asks the Question and Provides the Answer

The other facet of the approach to dialogue we come across in the Holy Qur'an is the novel way in which the person who poses the question does not expect to receive an answer from the other party. Instead, the questioner assumes the role of the provider of the answer. A series of questions and answers would then follow, so that the idea is clearly explained to the public at large. All queries and connotations are dealt with. Below is an example of this. The verse revolves around the debate between Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) and the idolaters of Quraish. The format of the questions is put to the Prophet and the expected answers are provided, thus:

> **Say: "What thing is most weighty in evidence?" Say: "God is witness between me and you; This Qur'an hath been revealed to me by inspiration, that I may warn you and all whom it reaches. Can ye possibly bear witness that besides God there is another God?" Say: "Nay! I cannot bear witness!" Say: "But in truth He is the one God, and I truly am innocent of (your blasphemy of) joining others with Him". [6:19]**

God has considered it necessary for His Prophet (s.a.w.) to pose the question in an exclamatory manner. He asked the idolaters first, **"What thing is most weighty in evidence?"** God then commanded him to provide the answer, concluding that it is so evident that it does not need contemplation. That is, the idolaters do not deny the existence of God, the Creator of all things; rather, they set up partners to Him, which, to their mind, might facilitate bringing them closer to Him. Then, the question is directed to the partners and gods. Do they have any existence? Do the idolaters bear witness that those partners are cognitive of the nature of divinity and the oneness of God? In reply, God commands the

Prophet to take a position on the matter without waiting for them to announce theirs. That is, the Prophet does not bear witness that there are other gods beside God and, instead, he bears witness to the One God and disavows any other gods. This is done so that he could confirm to them the conclusive truth that he wants them to recognize, leaving them to try to come to terms with the shock he has administered to their hearts and minds.

## A fair trial

The value of this approach is that it puts the Muslim activist in the position of a judge whose job it is to weigh the evidence and opinions of adversarial groups against those of the Message. He may in the process call to the witness box whoever would serve the course of justice. After that, he summons God, the Greatest and most Reliable Witness, to give evidence. He, who revealed the Qur'an to serve warning, would give His testimony on the truthfulness of the Islamic Message. While rejecting their claims, He invites the adversaries to give in to the thought being presented to them, or at least to ponder or discuss, it. However, no matter what reaction is in the making, the result of reflecting on, or discussing, it would be in favour of the Message, with all the ideology and law it stands for, by virtue the strength, comprehensiveness, and permeability it possesses.

# *Chapter V*

# The Way Dialogue Should Conclude

In many verses, the Holy Qur'an talks about the psychological state of the believer who is engaged in dialogue. Towards the end of dialogue, the believer should always follow the example of the personality and conduct of Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) in similar situations. It is obvious that, no matter how tense the atmosphere of the argument is, how aggressive and intransigent the other party may become, the Prophet remained calm and collected.

This position is symptomatic of the fact that, in what the Prophet (s.a.w.) practised, be it in a dialogue or other fields, he did not do it driven by his personal feelings or inclinations. The foundation of his conduct was the Message, which dictated the general atmosphere of any situation he was in. Thus, the interests that serve the Message used to determine the final touches he put to the closing stages of any debate. It is noteworthy that each of those final touches represented one aspect of the general position, taking into account the future path and vision of the work and the opening up of a new front in the debate, which he looked forward to.

In this regard, we discuss below some Qur'anic examples.

## Showing confidence in a position of strength

In the situation where the Prophet was responding to the accusations of falsehood and lying to God that were made against him by the idolaters, God has this to say:

> **Or do they say, "He has forged it"? Say: "If I had forged it, on me were my sin! And I am free of the sins of which ye are guilty!** [11:35]
>
> **Say: "If I am astray, I only stray to the loss of my own soul: but if I receive guidance, it is because of the inspiration of my Lord to me: it is He Who hears all things, and is (ever) near".** [34:50]
>
> **If they charge thee with falsehood, say: "My work to me, and yours to you! Ye are free from responsibility for what I do, and I for what ye do!"** [10:41]

In these verses we notice that the allegations against the Prophet (s.a.w.) were made in the wake of a long-drawn-out debate, in which he presented a lot of evidence on his prophecy, as is observed from many Qur'anic verses. They did not lend a listening ear to the Prophet's protestations, insisting on making false accusations against him. This was in a bid to lure him to trade insults with them, so as to detract from his lofty position, which embodied the spirituality and strength of the faith. Those tactics made him more resolute in his position. He stopped at the point where the issue should be resolved one way or another, in that if what he claimed of prophecy was false, he was the one who would be held responsible. Nevertheless, he turned the tables on them, in that they committed a vile deed by setting up partners to God and by blaspheming. Thus, he distanced himself from what they did. Going astray is a personal responsibility. Yet, the responsibility of others was limited to the dialogue that was being conducted between the two parties as to whether or not they agreed with him.

He then told those who did not want to believe him, nor did they want to listen to his argument attentively and objectively: What else could I have done after all that I have said, called for, and clarified? I went into all this in the hope that you might be guided to the right path. Consequently, each party should face the consequences of their own deeds. By the same token, each party should be responsible for rejecting the others' argument. Thus, there is no alternative but to have recourse to God who would adjudicate between us and pronounce who is in the right and who is in the wrong.

## The decisive word

God says:

> **And when they hear vain talk, they turn away therefrom and say: "To us our deeds, and to you yours; peace be with you: we seek not the ignorant".** [28:55]
>
> **And O my people! Do whatever ye can: I will do (my part): Soon will ye know who it is on whom descends the penalty of ignominy; and who is a liar! And watch ye! for I too am watching with you!** [11:93]
>
> **Say: "Ye shall not be questioned as to our sins, nor shall we be questioned as to what ye do".** [24:35]

Although these verses contain some features of the previous ones, yet

they add something new to them. In the first verse, the Holy Qur'an discusses the issue of **"vain talk"**, which the idolaters resorted to in order to drag Muslims into unimportant fights. This, we reckon, seems to be the case. The Muslims' response was dictated by their Islamic tenets, by complying with God's call for them to shun **"vain talk"**, and addressing the ignorant party with "may peace be with you". This is because wrangling with the ignorant would not serve any purpose, for the ignorant are not in the debate for gaining knowledge. They are there for mischief making, hence the decisive words **"we seek not the ignorant"**, i.e. each one of us should mind our own business; there is no need for tension and violent confrontation.

The second verse starts with making a strong, yet calm, threat. The Prophet says to them: Carry on with your work; I'm not going to abandon mine, nor am I going to stop dissenting; you'll see the result of all this before God.

## How Should We Face the Outcome of Dialogue Here and Now?

These gems should serve as incentives to the workers in the cause of God not to close the door on those who want to rejoin the ranks of believers, or there is a window of opportunity that they might mend their ways. Muslim workers should not fall prey to psychological tension or neurotic fits. They should stay above any feeling of vindictiveness and apportioning blame. They should, instead, do their best to freeze the dialogue with them for a cooling-off period, only to resume on much more solid bases, albeit at some time in future.

In this regard, we would like to call on those who have specialist knowledge in the field of jurisprudence and *Sharia* law – to the exclusion, for instance, of Islamic history and philosophy, or some matters relating to the fields of doctrine, politics, and sociology – to show some humility towards those who have knowledge in those fields. They should not, however, make a mantle of sanctity of the positions they hold in Islamic life, in order to perpetuate any ideological or practical mistakes they may have made. They should refrain from preventing people from engaging in debate with them or from trying to prove them wrong. It seems that if any attempt is made to question their authority or challenge their opinions, they might resort to branding the dissenting voices ignorant, blasphemers, or deviators from the right path. This is likely to make the dissenters withdraw their support in situations of struggle that may come to the fore in the future.

Among the duties of Muslim activists is that of bringing people closer to them through wise methods, which although emanating from strength are free from abrasiveness. They should show leniency, yet without exhibiting weakness. Thus, they should remain the haven in whose safety the misled and the haughty, who yearn to revert to the truth, find refuge. Success should be the share of the activists in the new situations, having failed in old ones.

The above-quoted Qur'anic verses can show us the right approach, which God wants the activists to advocate when making their case in a

dialogue with their adversaries. This is so that the Message remains a beacon that guides the stray to the right path.

There is no way this approach can be described as that of the weak and defeated, as some people would like to dub it. They seem to read into the Prophet's position vis-ä-vis the [hypothetical] responsibility for fabricating the claim of prophecy, of which the idolaters chose to accuse him, a recognition that he – and by extension the Muslim activists – might be untruthful in what they claim. This is outrageous. No one has the right to describe those kinds of approaches with those adjectives, because the issue of weakness and defeatism is a relative one, i.e. it is governed by the prevailing circumstances.

Should weakness manifest itself in a situation of war, fighting, or defending oneself, weakness might do harm to the cause of the side on the receiving end, viz. it might be accused as having lost the will to fight back. Yet, should the issue be a mission to convey a message, with a view to guiding others to the right path, weakness could translate as that which takes away from the human being the element of taking the initiative in exploring new venues to spread the Message to a wider audience. Strength, on the other hand, could translate as taking the initiative in whatever ensures the achievement of the aim.

The issue of strength and weakness is a relative one. It varies according to time, circumstances, and domains, be they in peace, war, ideological warfare, or any other human activity. Thus, one should be careful not to blur the lines, which might lead to losing one's way in a maze of hypotheses, where judgements and the rationale behind them interlock, which could prove difficult to untangle.

# *Chapter VI*

## Qur'anic Storytelling in Dialogue (1)

In order to appeal to human beings' hearts and minds, the Holy Qur'an has used a number of approaches. This has been in an effort to persuade humans to espouse the truth, which is traced back to God, and the true path, which leads to Him. It has been done in such a way as to allow the faith to touch on the innermost feelings of man. The spiritual experience should roam in the vast realm of the ideology, lest the faith be dulled by the barrenness of the thought, or the thought should give in to the rawness of the senses.

Storytelling is among the styles of dialogue the Holy Qur'an has adopted. The approach has been applied to different brands of storytelling. Some have been historical tales, which talk about the prophets of old and bygone generations; others have been meant to serve a moral purpose; and a third type of tale, which is precise and terse in what it tries to convey, usually discusses a certain position or a particular aspect of a certain human being.

In its aims and objects, the story is not intended to give us an account of history *per se*. It is not expected to dwell on portraying a picture only of what happened, so that it should be governed by the *modus operandi* of storytelling, especially the detailed account of the incident or the position.

The Qur'anic story is entwined with the main guidelines and message of the Holy Qur'an, i.e. the call to the way of God, guiding people to the truth, and eventually showing them the light to believing in God and submitting to Him. Thus, it seeks to deliver man from the darkness of dishonesty and malpractice to the light that is emanating from the heart of the Message in God's realms.

In the historical facts and situations of which the Qur'anic story has told, it has sought to achieve all the aims [discussed above]. Sometimes it can be seen that particular historical stories have been repeated in more than one *surah*, because they have a bearing, as a whole or in part, on the context and the notion being discussed in that particular chapter.

As a result, the Qur'anic style advocates different approaches to telling the story. Sometimes a detailed account of the story is given, which may contain most of the characteristics of storytelling. At other times, it gives a summary, usually contained in one or two verses.

The style may tackle the story either from the start or the end, according to the idea or the aspect being discussed or handled, or the situation or position being highlighted or focused on.

## The Qur'anic story stresses the unity of the Message

Among the aims of the Qur'anic story are stressing the unity of the Divine Message, the unity of the methods the messengers use to call to the way of God, the unity of the spiritual world they live in while making efforts to deliver the Message and in enduring the trials and tribulations in executing their missions, including the challenges mounted against them by their adversaries. This should serve as evidence of the one common path that God wanted His Messages to run along. It should also serve as a proof of the uniform problems that the activists confront at all times and places, regardless of the differences in circumstances of each and every mission and messenger. In the same vein, the Qur'anic story tries to highlight the uniformity that characterizes the motives of the unbelievers, the haughty, and the straying, in that these motives stem from personal inclinations. The unbelievers do not seem to be standing on any ideological ground in their rejection of God's Message.

The history of the prophets, in all that they came to stand for, the problems they faced, and the achievements they made, was an important factor in achieving that aim. For this reason, the Holy Qur'an has discussed in detail their experiences and personal and public positions. This is so that Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.), his companions, and those who have followed in their footsteps would find the lively picture of reunion between the past and the present of the Divine Messages. That is, without losing sight of the difference in time, place, and circumstances that had characterized each and every Message. Pondering their history would provide us with the opportunity to learn from their experiences in spreading the Message. Their history would provide us with the experience we require to withstand the pressures and odd situations, and thus give us the strength and resilience to weather adversity. It makes clear how God eventually perfected His victory on the prophets in anchoring their Messages firmly on the stage of life, against all the odds and challenges.

Also among the aims of the Qur'an is presenting life's issues by way of giving examples, where the concept should be clearly defined. Thus the Qur'anic story has proved to be among the most successful methods of achieving this end result, by virtue of manifesting the notion in a live and dynamic real life setting, instead of talking about it in abstract terms.

## Two distinct styles of Qur'anic storytelling

One can talk about two distinct manners of telling the story in the Holy Qur'an: reporting the incidents from the start of the tale to its end, and role-play, where each player in the plot plays his or her part in a transparent style. Interaction between the players then ensues.

The first approach deals with minor incidents of history. The storyteller here plays the role of guiding the listener to the fundamental points in a manner that borders on the instructive in filling the gaps.

The importance of the dialogue style of storytelling lies in its attempt to simplify and make understandable the concept all round, so that no aspect should remain ambiguous. This is because each party to the dialogue does their best to put across their point of view.

However, there is another point that distinguishes the dialogue style. It paints a live and dynamic picture of the scene. Thus, the reader lives the situations, one after the other, trying to visualize the climate of the historical occurrences through the activity of the heroes of the story as though he were living then. The reader does not only experience the narrative and its connotations, but also the dynamism and atmosphere that govern the entire story. It is obvious, therefore, that recounting the facts of the story *per se* cannot serve this purpose, although it should provide a detailed account of the situation.

This has been the reason why the Holy Qur'an has concentrated more on dialogue in telling a story in order to portray a lively picture of the history of the Message in its vitality in real life situations, which the Qur'an has desired to relate to the present, stressing the common denominator between all the Divine Messages. It may be said too that the Holy Qur'an has desired to raise the vital issues that relate to people's lives in order to give them that extra dimensionin in their minds.

Here, we are trying to sail through some samples of Qur'anic stories that are told in a dialogue style, in the history of prophetic missions to

deliver the Divine Message to people. Some stories should also touch on the fundamental issues as they simmer in real life situations. This should help the cause of propagating the way to God and the journey of Islam in life.

# With the Prophets in Dialogue on their Message

## Noah and his people

The Holy Qur'an has related the story of Prophet Noah (a.s.) in at least six chapters. We will discuss his story in the light of the Qur'anic style that seeks not to elaborate on all the details of the story. It has confined the discussion to those aspects that have a bearing on the prime objectives of the Message. Since we do not aim to analyse the subject of the plot, but to feel the dialogue that is taking place in it in order to get to the moral it is trying to impart, we are going to focus more on the dialogue.

Here, we are trying to empathize with Prophet Noah (a.s.) through the words he utters in the context of his noble task, his stand on the battleground, his approach to convincing others to embrace his thought in a climate of love and compassion that is symptomatic of the ideology he came to spread.

In this climate, we can see that the forces of unbelief that take part in dialogue with Noah are bereft of any meaningful thought or love which they can exchange with his. They paint a picture of a narrow-minded people who seem bent on not giving the words of Noah (a.s.) any chance to sink into their minds. They are adamant not to follow the climate of the Message, preferring to indulge in personal and class concerns. Thus, taking a position on the Message is, to their mind, tied to the personality of the Messenger and his social rank, the kind of followers the Message has attracted and their social and financial positions. This appears to be the case even without attaching any importance to the thought of where God fits in all that, and the Message's significance in spiritual as well as human terms, especially for the future well being of the nation (*ummah*).

Now we move along with the mood of the Qur'anic dialogue in scene one of the story of Noah, as though there was no time lag.

### The reasons the unbelievers give for rejecting belief

This position can be examined in these Qur'anic verses:

**We sent Noah to his people (with a mission): "I have come to you**

**with a Clear Warning: That ye serve none but God: Verily I do fear for you the penalty of a grievous day". But the chiefs of the Unbelievers among his people said: "We see (in) thee nothing but a man like ourselves: Nor do we see that any follow thee but the meanest among us, in judgement immature: Nor do we see in you (all) any merit above us: in fact we think ye are liars!"** [11:25–27]

Noah calls his people to the way of Allah, warning them with torment, with an express fear for their safety, in the way someone's heart goes out to their loved ones when they see that harm is coming their way.

He engages them in dialogue with a view to leading them to belief and to the right path; he urges them to respond to his call and discuss it. Yet, they seem to have nothing to do with the Message Noah has come to them with, concerning themselves with social and tribal allegiances. They look as if they are oblivious to their fate, which the Message has come to tell them of. Instead, their way of thinking is completely overtaken by personal and social rank concerns.

The verses mention the line of thinking of the unbelievers. Their stand vis-ä-vis Noah's Message is that there is nothing that could set Noah apart to take up that important position of prophecy, because they maintain that he is a human like them. That aside, to their mind, there is nothing that would entice them to respond to his call positively and follow him, particularly when those who did follow him are counted among the meanest among their folk. In their judgement, there will be no purpose served if they, being the dignitaries of their people, rub shoulders with the "inferior" elements of society.

So, in order for them to accept Noah's call to belief, the prophet and his followers should come from a certain rank in the social pecking order. They have yet another reason for rejecting the Message. It is that Noah (a.s.) and his followers are not superior to them, so that they can carry the torch of the Message and call on people to follow it.

In the end, these justifications have led to the inevitable outcome, where the verse concludes with their words **"in fact we think ye are liars!"**, in that, according to them, the distinction between right and wrong is social merit, not the critical and rational judgement of the Message and its proponents.

## Opening up to the truth

Since this is their rationale for rejecting his call, Prophet Noah (a.s.) has decided to reason with them on the same lines, in the hope that he may be successful in breaking the ice, and that they may address the real issues and concepts of the Message:

> **He said: "O my people! See ye if (it be that) I have a Clear Sign from my Lord, and that He hath sent Mercy unto me from His own presence, but that the Mercy hath been obscured from your sight? Shall we compel you to accept it when ye are averse to it? And O my people! I ask you for no wealth in return: my reward is from none but God: But I will not drive away (in contempt) those who believe: for verily they are to meet their Lord, and ye I see are the ignorant ones! And O my people! Who would help me against God if I drove them away? Will ye not then take heed? I tell you not that with me are the treasures of God, nor do I know what is hidden, nor claim I to be an angel. Nor yet do I say, of those whom your eyes do despise that God will not grant them (all) that is good: God knoweth best what is in their souls: I should, if I did, indeed be a wrong-doer".** [11:28–31]

What Noah criticizes of their argument is that the questions of prophecy and the Message do not fit the straightjacket they try to put them in. The Message endures in the context of evidence, which testifies to its credibility. They have nothing to lose in approaching it with an open mind to know if it contains the truth. As for the humanness of the messenger, Noah does agree with them, for he does not try to raise the position of the messenger above that of mankind. He admits that he does not have any control over the treasures of the earth so that he might attract them financially. He cannot foretell the future so that people could follow him for his knowledge of their secrets. It is not in his power to elevate his human status to that of the angels, so that people might submit to him out of fear. He is but the Messenger of God, Who entrusted him with delivering His Message with clear proofs. All that it takes is for them to open their minds to it with no commitment, i.e. they are free to take it or leave it. No one is going to coerce them into accepting it, should they choose to head up a blind alley.

In his bid to understand why they reject his call to them to join the ranks of the faithful, Noah (a.s.) puts it bluntly to them that he is not in it for personal material gain, because the Divine messengers do not expect

to be paid for their work. They hope that God will reward them in this life and in the hereafter. He then turns his attention to talking about his followers, whom they dubbed as socially inferior in accordance with a social structure that judges people in terms of their wealth, lineage, or power. He then announces to them that he cannot drive those believers away. They will meet God and submit before him the account of their deeds, firm in the knowledge that God will grant them lofty positions. That is, God does not look down on people for their colour, wealth – or lack of it – or social standing. Rather, He judges them for their intentions and deeds. If He knows that they are well intentioned, He will reward them in the same measure.

Prophet Noah (a.s.) then raises before them the issue of powerfulness and weakness, in that if he were to turn them away, who is going to protect him from God? Are they going to offer him sanctuary from God's punishment, if he has gone ahead with ousting those believers, who are the friends and soldiers of God? He is urging them to wake up from their slumber in ignorance and call to mind their positions, power base, and the kind of misguidance that overwhelms them.

He does all this in a loving and open way. Will they reciprocate? Say, by getting involved in dialogue. Nay, the response is a display of sheer arrogance and playing down the threat of punishment.

They are not up to dialogue, for they lack the evidence with which they can contest his clear proofs. They have nothing of substance to throw at Noah except intransigence, defiance, and impatience:

> **"They said: 'O Noah! Thou hast disputed with us, and (much) hast thou prolonged the dispute with us: now bring upon us what thou threatenest us with, if thou speakest the truth!'"** [11:32].

They even threatened him with stoning him to death if he did not desist from calling them to belief:

> **They said: 'If thou desist not, O Noah! Thou shalt be stoned (to death)'** [26:116].

What was his response? He does not want to brag about his ability to cause punishment to descend upon them. He has kept his integrity as the Messenger of God, who does not have control over what will become of him, be it good or evil. He does not end his call on a note better than it started with. At the outset, he proclaims to them that he fears for them from the chastisement of grievous day. His fear does not diminish,

especially after they have rebelled against him without any evidence. Thus, his reaction is calm, as it draws on the spirit and strength of the Message:

> **"He said: 'Truly, God will bring it on you if He wills, and then, ye will not be able to frustrate it!'"** [11:33].

In dialogue, there always remains the personality of the Messenger, who cannot do anything without God's will, exuding love and kindness for his people, yet showing composure and control over the situation:

> **"Of no profit will be my counsel to you, much as I desire to give you (good) counsel, if it be that God willeth to leave you astray: He is your Lord! And to Him will ye return!"** [11:34].

Then the decisive Divine intervention comes in to propose to Noah how he should respond to his people's charge against him, i.e. of feigning the prophecy. God revealed to Noah to tell his people that he should be held responsible for all that he talks about and calls for, yet they should face the consequences of their intransigence, blasphemy, and rebellion. Thus, he draws the curtain on any further debate that is not going to yield any meaningful result:

> **Or do they say, 'He has forged it?' Say: 'If I had forged it, on me were my sin! And I am free of the sins of which ye are guilty!'** [11:35].

Scene one of the story leaves no doubt as to the difference of style and focus between the prophets' approach to calling to the way of God and that of their adversaries. The stark difference between the two approaches should give the activists, at any time and any place, food for thought, in that they should emulate the prophets' approach. The approach is a combination of calmness radiating with confidence, responding to the challenge without animosity, and strength of evidence that is tinged with love and kindness. This is so as to leave the door open for the opponent to return through love, because lovingness is worthy of bringing the heart closer to the truth, whereas the mind could shy away from facing up to it.

At the same time, it gives a vivid and lively example of the Messages in their setting forth from a base of openness on the truth, in all its wide spheres, while the adversaries always seek to tread on narrow and twisted alleyways that can hardly have room for those who are already there, let alone others.

Scene two starts with God's revelation to Noah, thus:

> **It was revealed to Noah: 'None of thy people will believe except those who have believed already! So grieve no longer over their (evil) deeds'. [11:36].**

## The state Noah was left in after the dialogue reached a dead end

The Qur'anic chapter that is dedicated to telling Noah's story, gives you an idea about the psychological state he was in after the dialogue with his people had reached a stalemate. He was on the verge of despondency. As a responsible prophet, he stood before God to give Him a lively account of his work all those years. He was reporting to God how he spared no effort to win some people over to his cause:

> **He said: "O my Lord! I have called to my People night and day: But my call only increases (their) flight (from the Right).**
>
> **"And every time I have called to them, that Thou mightest forgive them, they have (only) thrust their fingers into their ears, covered themselves up with their garments, grown obstinate, and given themselves up to arrogance. So I have called to them aloud; further I have spoken to them in public and secretly in private, saying, 'Ask forgiveness from your Lord; for He is Oft-Forgiving; he will send rain to you in abundance; give you increase in wealth and sons; and bestow on you gardens and bestow on you rivers (of flowing water). What is the matter with you, that ye place not your hope for kindness and long-suffering in God, Seeing that it is He that has created you in diverse stages? See ye not how God has created the seven heavens one above another, and made the moon a light in their midst, and made the sun as a (Glorious) Lamp? and God has produced you from the earth growing (gradually), and in the End He will return you into the (earth), and raise you forth (again at the Resurrection)? And God has made the earth for you as a carpet (spread out), that ye may go about therein, in spacious roads".'**
>
> **Noah said: "O my Lord! They have disobeyed me, but they follow (men) whose wealth and children give them no increase but only Loss. And they have devised a tremendous Plot. And they have said (to each other), 'Abandon not your gods: Abandon neither Wadd nor Suwa', neither Yaguth nor Ya'uq, nor Nasr'; they have already misled many; and grant Thou no increase to the wrong-doers but in straying (from their mark).**

**Because of their sins they were drowned (in the flood), and were made to enter the Fire (of Punishment): and they found in lieu of God none to help them.**

**And Noah, said: "O my Lord! Leave not of the Unbelievers, a single one on earth! For, if Thou dost leave (any of) them, they will but mislead Thy devotees, and they will breed none but wicked ungrateful ones. O my Lord! Forgive me, my parents, all who enter my house in Faith, and (all) believing men and believing women: and to the wrong-doers grant Thou no increase but in perdition!"** [71:5–28]

We would like to dwell a bit on this magnificent account, which Prophet Noah (a.s.) submitted to his Lord, describing in detail all the efforts he put in his noble task, especially the dialogues he conducted with his people to urge them to embrace belief in God, and giving feedback to the response he received from them. In his report, Noah prayed to the Almighty to exchange his people with others, because he had exhausted all the ways to convince them of his message. There was no room for another endeavour. A justification was given for his prayer for getting rid of them, i.e. the danger they might pose to future generations, because the climate in which they lived was conducive to everything that was vile, and that their offspring would follow their line. Nevertheless, he remained optimistic because resignation did not feature in the dictionary of the prophets, especially when the situation was tied in with the Divine will. In this regard, there are few points that are worthy of pondering:

### 1. The prophet does not leave any stone unturned

Noah, the prophet, did not leave any opportunity that was made available to him without reminding his people to reconsider their position and embrace the religion, as penitence would provide a fresh start, where darkness would be left behind. They rejected all his overtures, preferring to follow the affluent people who took it upon themselves to stand against any call to the bright way of God, as these forces got used to living in darkness, and for the aim of perpetuating it.

Thus, the Message makes it incumbent on the messenger and, by the same token, the Islamic call on the activist, not to let any opportunity pass without giving leeway for repentance. This is because the spirit of the Message is like the spirit of the military, which is capable of turning man into a power whose control is outside, i.e. because it is controlled by

the Message in all its capabilities and times. It marches on, or comes to a halt, only when the Message says so. It has no freedom in going about its personal affairs, away from the command centre of the Message.

### 2. The revelation, not hopelessness, brings the mission to an end

Hopelessness did not find its way to the heart of Noah (a.s.). It was the Divine revelation that ended his prophetic mission, when it was revealed to him that none of his people was going to convert to his cause, apart from the few who had already done so. The revelation came in the wake of Noah's reporting back to his Lord that all his efforts in trying to win them over to His way had come to very little, asking God to grant him victory over them.

### 3. Indignation is not for personal reasons

Noah's prayer for his people was not driven by personal vendetta for the disappointment he suffered at their hands. Rather, it stemmed from his responsibility as a prophet who spared no effort to prove his case in dialogue with the unbelievers. When he saw no hope in them to try to mend their ways, he thought it fit to close an old chapter and turn over a new leaf, so that people may celebrate the triumph of belief over unbelief.

That was why he pleaded with his Lord to grant him victory over them because they represented the force that pulled the strings in society, which was predominantly atheistic. There was also the fear that that corrupt society was going to lead to a similar one.

### 4. The Divine Messages do not safeguard unwarranted privileges

The Divine Messages do not seek to protect the privileges of the affluent. Far from it, they come to make a great effort in restricting any unjustified concessions. The Messages endeavour to raise the standard of the downtrodden of society. That was why the poor and the needy, who were dubbed by the unbelievers as the most inferior class of society, were the followers of the Message and its faithful soldiers. They were the ones who were closer to God and His messenger; the reason being that they found their salvation in it in this world before the next.

We notice here that religious history played a role in refuting the unjust criticism that says that divine religions have come to lull people spiritually so that the exploitative groups of society go about their business in cheating the less fortunate sections of society. They, therefore,

maintain that the religious phenomenon is just another face of the mutual interests of the religious establishment and the forces of oppression and exploitation.

## Ridicule vs. ridicule

The plan of meting out chastisement to Noah's people started with God's command to Noah to end his mission and start building the Ark, without giving him any leeway to intercede with Him on their behalf any more, for their fate was sealed.

Noah's people started making fun of him for building the Ark in a landlocked area. The order from God to him was clear, in that he should trade ridicule with them, because they did not know what would become of their fate. They would have nothing to look forward to, except the deluge, which would drown everybody save the believers:

> **Forthwith he (starts) constructing the Ark: Every time that the chiefs of his people passed by him, they threw ridicule on him. He said: "If ye ridicule us now, we (in our turn) can look down on you with ridicule likewise! But soon will ye know who it is on whom will descend a penalty that will cover them with shame, on whom will be unloosed a penalty [ever]lasting".** [11:38–39]

## Noah's affliction with his son

There came the deluge. Noah and his band went aboard the ship. It was sailing as if in rough seas. The water level kept rising, flooding everything in its way – towns, villages, people, and animals.

Those were trying times for Noah (a.s.), for his son was adamant not to join in and board the ship with his father. He preferred to stick it out with the camp of unbelief alongside his mother who was of the same persuasion. The dialogue between father and son is brilliantly captured in the following Qur'anic verses:

> **So, the Ark floated with them on the waves (towering) like mountains, and Noah called out to his son, who had separated himself (from the rest): "O my son! Embark with us, and be not with the unbelievers!" The son replied: "I will betake myself to some mountain: it will save me from the water". Noah said: "This day nothing can save, from the command of God, any but those on whom He hath mercy! "And the waves came between them, and the son was among those overwhelmed in the Flood.** [11:42–43]

**And the floodwater receded: "Then the word went forth: 'O earth! Swallow up thy water, and O sky! Withhold (thy rain)!' and the water abated, and the matter was ended. The Ark rested on Mount Judi, and the word went forth: 'Away with those who do wrong!'" [11:44].**

## Belief vs. family ties

Noah (a.s.) remained battling with the question of losing his son; he was trying to get to terms with the bereavement. God had promised him to save members of his family when he ordered him to put on the ship a couple [male and female] of each and every creatures, his family – except those whose affair was resolved – and those who had already joined the camp of belief. However, what seemed to escape Noah's mind was that saving members of his family did not cover those members whose destiny was sealed. Noah turned his face to his Lord in supplication:

**And Noah called upon his Lord, and said: 'O my Lord! Surely my son is of my family! And Thy promise is true, and Thou art the Most Just of judges!' [11:45].**

The answer came unequivocally. There should be a complete severance of relations between the prophet and the unbelievers, even though some of them were his blood relatives, thus:

**He said: 'O Noah! He is not of thy family: For his conduct is unrighteous. So ask not of Me that of which thou hast no knowledge! I give thee counsel, lest thou should act like the ignorant!' [11:46].**

It was a somewhat blunt response, which contained a warning. It outlined for Noah the boundaries of his ties with members of his family. The yardstick being that of belief; beyond which no relationship should be contemplated.

Noah (a.s.) was basking in the glory and climate of the Message, seeking refuge with God and asking His forgiveness, for he did not have any lingering doubts as to the truthfulness of servitude to God. He just wanted to know the essence of God's promise in reality:

**Noah said: 'O my Lord! I do seek refuge with Thee, lest I should ask Thee for that of which I have no knowledge. And unless Thou forgive me and have Mercy on me, I should indeed be lost!' [11:47].**

This section of the story of Noah, the prophet, concludes with God's call to Noah and his companions, that they have been graced with His mercy and bounty:

> **The word came: "O Noah! Come down (from the Ark) with peace from Us, and blessing on thee and on some of the peoples (who will spring) from those with thee: but (there will be other) peoples to whom We shall grant their pleasures (for a time), but in the end will a grievous penalty reach them from Us". [11:48]**

This has been the story of Prophet Noah (a.s.). It started with dialogues between him and his people, his son, and his Lord. It ended with him having a dialogue with his Lord, bringing his mission to an end by asking for clarifications of certain aspects, which he found ambiguous and were pressing for answers. In the end, God granted him, and the band of believers who followed him, peace and blessings.

### The moral of this story

In conclusion, we should ponder a number of points from the last chapter in the story to learn some lessons for the present and the future.

### 1. Principle of reciprocity

Muslim activists may resort to the same policy used by the other party, in this case ridicule, should no other weapon be left in their armoury. That is, it is not realistic that they reciprocate with kindness in situations where the response to amiability is ridicule.

The strategy, of the adversaries of divine messages, of trivializing these messages is a type of psychological warfare intended to unsettle the believers by portraying them as irrelevant, and consequently unworthy of being taken seriously. The prime objective of this game is to scare people away from the Message the believers are trying to spread. Thus, this strategy has not come into being by mere chance. It is driven by a well-thought-out plan. Accordingly, it has to be fought with the same vigour and resourcefulness, in that the activists should use everything at their disposal to perfect the art of making jokes at the adversarial ideologies and their exponents as a means of defending oneself and faith. This can drain the opponents mentally and morally, using the same weapon. This has been the aim of the Qur'an, in the story of Noah, when he was directed by God to use the same weapon of ridicule against his people.

### 2. Goodness of father vs. badness of son

It is not necessary that the offspring of the prophets be good like their fathers, albeit desirable. So the goodness of any person should not be a

pointer to the righteousness of their posterity, because their being unrighteous should not necessarily be taken to mean unrighteousness of their parents. It should not escape anyone's mind that sons and daughters are subject, in the way they conduct themselves, to social influences, be they good or evil, insomuch as they are the product of their own private climate, i.e. the family. The father should endeavour to bring his children up in the best manner and to the best of his ability. Should he succeed, he would have achieved his objective; if not, he would have discharged his duty.

The crux of the matter is in defining the responsibility within its lawful framework. The task of the messenger and any other activist is their calling people, including their own relatives, to the way of God. In executing their task, they are free to use any means at their disposal – by word and deed, carrot and stick, and directly and indirectly. Should they exhaust all the means in going about discharging their responsibilities, their work would be accepted, regardless of whether or not their invitation has been accepted, by people closer to them or those at large. Whatever the result might turn out to be, this would not detract from the position of the messenger.

### 3. Delivering the Message impartially should be paramount

The messengers should not fall prey to their personal preferences and feelings vis-ä-vis their family members. They should not follow their emotions slavishly, should any member of their families prefer to side with falsehood rather than guidance and light. The Message should be the final arbiter in determining their relationship. There is no harm in relationships with others that are based on feelings, provided that they do not encroach on the principles of the Message. Yet, should the reverse happen, precedence should be given to the Message over the relationship. God says:

> **Thou wilt not find any people who believe in God and the Last Day, loving those who resist God and His Apostle, even though they were their fathers or their sons, or their brothers, or their kindred. For such He has written Faith in their hearts, and strengthened them with a spirit from Himself. And He will admit them to Gardens beneath which Rivers flow, to dwell therein (for ever). God will be well pleased with them, and they with Him. They are the Party of God. Truly it is the Party of God that will achieve Felicity.** [58:22]

This has been the story of Prophet Noah (a.s.) in his dialogue with his people, with all its implications on, and practical results for, the future trend of the call to the way of God. We may have gone outside the reach we have put down for the discussion in certain aspects. It is because getting engrossed in the climate of dialogue has required that in general terms.

## Hood and his People, Aad

This is another of the Qur'anic stories of the history of prophets and their peoples. It is that of Hood and his people, Aad. This story is mentioned in some eight chapters, such as A'araf, Hood, Mu'minoun, Shu'ara, Ahqaaf, Thaariyaat, Qamar, and Fajr. The Qur'anic style has varied in telling this tale, shuttling between the style of recounting the historical facts and the dialogue-style of storytelling.

In our exposition, we will concentrate on discussing the story within a dialogue setting. We shall endeavour to bring to light the characteristics of the approach of this prophet to dialogue with his people, who differ in some respects from prophet Noah's people and others. This is with the aim of coming up with a variety of approaches that we can put to use in our contemporary life.

We shall discuss the subject of this story in the surroundings in which the dialogue was conducted between prophet and people.

God says:

> **To the 'Ad people, (We sent) Hud, one of their (own) brethren: He said: "O my people! Worship God! Ye have no other god but Him will ye not fear (God)?" The leaders of the unbelievers among his people said: "Ah! We see thou art an imbecile!" and "We think thou art a liar!" He said: "O my people! I am no imbecile, but (I am) a messenger from the Lord and Cherisher of the worlds! I but fulfil towards you the duties of my Lord's mission: I am to you a sincere and trustworthy adviser. Do ye wonder that there hath come to you a message from your Lord through a man of your own people, to warn you? Call in remembrance that He made you inheritors after the people of Noah, and gave you a stature tall among the nations. Call in remembrance the benefits (ye have received) from God: that so ye may prosper".** [7:65–69]

### A contest between two approaches

At the start, the approach of the unbelievers was to accuse the prophet of stupidity and telling lies. His reply was more restrained and amicable. He called upon them to reflect on the issues and laws he had raised before

them, reminding them that he was intent on giving them good counsel. He then calmly exclaimed as to why they could not comprehend the sending of a messenger among them, who was of their own. What was the justification for their refusal to accept that? He went on to remind them to call to mind God's favours to them – of physical power, so much so that they could dig out houses in the rock. How they were given preference over other peoples, whom they ruled over. What was their reaction? Did they accept Hood's invitation to ponder his message, so that they could engage him in dialogue to clarify the situation? None of that was forthcoming. They were bent on showing intransigence and haughtiness, forestalling any move towards change, accusing him of slandering the faith of their fathers and forefathers, reacting furiously, and challenging him to bring down on them the curse of punishment, which they thought he was incapable of making happen, or he was not serious in effecting it. This was their multi-faceted position on Hood's argument. This had turned the good-intentioned honest argument into a dangerous stand-off:

> **They said: 'Comest thou to us, that we may worship God alone, and give up the cult of our fathers? Bring us what thou threatenest us with, if so be that thou tellest the truth!'** [7:70].

Yet, the response came sharp and enlightening, carrying in its turns ridicule of what they worshipped, i.e. idols that were bereft of any power to overcome anything, let alone the Omnipotent. What they worshipped were just names, which did not carry any weight or value, thus:

> **He said: 'Punishment and wrath have already come upon you from your Lord: dispute ye with me over names which ye have devised, ye and your fathers, without authority from God? Then wait: I am amongst you, also waiting'.** [7:71].

The shades of the picture are even more defined:

> **O my people! I ask of you no reward for this (Message). My reward is from none but Him who created me: Will ye not then understand? And O my people! Ask forgiveness of your Lord, and turn to Him (in repentance): He will send you the skies pouring abundant rain, and add strength to your strength: so turn ye not back in sin!** [11:51–52]

He touched a nerve when he raised their hopes of abundant water, to which they used to look forward in their desert land, in giving them more power that was a source of their boasting and vanity, and calling upon

them to ask God's forgiveness, the Lord who has control over all that. He warned them not to turn away from him, while being overwhelmed by crime, rebellion, and sin.

### What was their response?

> **They said: "O Hud! No clear (Sign) that hast thou brought us, and we are not the ones to desert our gods on thy word! Nor shall we believe in thee! We say nothing but that (perhaps) some of our gods may have seized thee with imbecility". He said: "I call God to witness, and do ye bear witness, that I am free from the sin of ascribing, to Him, other gods as partners! So scheme (your worst) against me, all of you, and give me no respite. I put my trust in God, my Lord and your Lord! There is not a moving creature, but He hath grasp of its forelock. Verily, it is my Lord that is on a straight Path. If ye turn away, I (at least) have conveyed the Message with which I was sent to you. My Lord will make another people to succeed you, and you will not harm Him in the least. For my Lord hath care and watch over all things".** [11:53–57]

They snubbed his argument without any convincing counter argument; they turned down his invitation because they deemed him weak. They accused him of insanity for attacking their gods, branding him with a whole raft of pejoratives. However, he declared his disavowal of their setting up partners with God, both with His testimony and their own testimonial, in order that he could draw a line between both the parties in the end. As for the situation arising from branding him weak and insignificant, he countered that with the power of the All-powerful, which is capable of overcoming them by another people, after He had disposed of them, without their being able to do anything to stop that. Then he defied them if there was anything in their power they could do to harm him, leaving them under no illusions that they could not reach him.

Thus, this approach is worth pondering by the workers in the way of God, with a view to following its example in their work among the communities they live in and aspire to guide them to God's path.

## Comparing the Peoples of Noah and Aad

By contrasting both the stories of prophets Noah and Hood (a.s.) and their peoples, we can come up with these observations:

The line of thinking of the people of Noah was similar to that of the

people of Aad, i.e. they had almost identical viewpoints with regard to (a) the personality of the prophet, (b) rejecting the feasibility of a human being becoming a prophet, (c) accusing the prophet of fabrications and telling lies, (d) branding him insane, (e) sanctifying the faith of their ancestors and their morals, and (f) dismissing the notion of resurrection. The reason for this similarity could be the proximity of time between the two peoples, as has been mentioned in the Holy Qur'an:

> **Call in remembrance that He made you inheritors after the people of Noah, and gave you a stature tall among the nations. Call in remembrance the benefits (ye have received) from God: that so ye may prosper.** [7:69].

The Divine Messages were on a collision course with the well-off section of society, which instinctively used to wage war against those Messages because they were under the illusion of feeling threatened and for fear of relinquishing their privileges. It is worth noting that the Divine Messages do no grant any concessions to any individual or group of people outside the remit of work and merit. This can be observed from the Qur'anic description of this group of people as opulent and the singling out of this portrayal when recounting real life situations.

The adversaries of the Messages were unable to prove rationally their case in rejecting those Messages. Their rejection was induced by their inability to come out from the status quo and embrace change.

The prophet, in Hood's case as well as in Noah's, stood his ground by giving good counsel, exercising restraint and forbearance, in trying to open a window on their hearts and minds, as perchance they might accept the truth and be guided to the right path, i.e. that of belief in God. He did all that without letting his personal anger take hold over him because, in discharging his noble mission, he did not have any personal choices. What governed his moves and the positions he contemplated, and eventually took, were the principles and the interests of the Message alone. These were the similarities between the stories of the two prophets, Noah and Hood, and their peoples.

What distinguished the latter from the former was that Hood's people were far more powerful than Noah's. This meant that they managed to mount a more determined opposition and show far greater intransigence, in which case they exerted more pressure on Prophet Hood.

Yet, Hood did not give in to their pressure and defied their physical power, in that it was God-given and that He is the All-powerful and He alone can strip them of it. Without His will they could neither earn any benefit nor cause harm, and neither death nor life.

He went further in defying them with the Power he derived from God, addressing them thus:

> **So scheme (your worst) against me, all of you, and give me no respite. [11:55].**

It is evident that, according to the prevailing circumstances, the style of dialogue was ranging from the mild, which was intended to open their hearts and minds to the truth, to the severe, which was meant to make the opponent see sense.

This has been the picture, which the story of Hood, in his dialogue with his people on the question of belief in God, the Qur'anic verses have been trying to paint. Maybe, the picture has revealed more than we have been able to put our fingers on.

## Saleh and Thamoud

This is another of the stories of prophets, which is not different from the other ones. These stories have a common thread that runs through all of them. They seem to share similar circumstances undergone by the prophets, the issues they raised and their style of dialogue with the unbelievers, especially their attempt to loosen the stranglehold of the rich and powerful on the disenfranchised and weaker sections of society.

However, the difference in Saleh's story is that he was sent to his people with a sign from God, a she-camel that provided them with milk so abundant that it never ran out, no matter how big their number was. The drinking water was equally divided between the people and the she-camel, in that the day when she came to drink was hers alone and the day when they wanted to get water was theirs alone. Saleh's people did not like the allocation of water, in that they saw in the animal defiance of their dignity and arrogance. They therefore killed it, heralding the punishment which would descend on them fast.

Without going into the details of the story, we would like to dwell on two fundamental points that have characterized the dialogue in this story:

[The first point is] the attempt by the despotic forces to raise doubt in the minds of those who were deemed weak about the validity of Prophet Saleh's Message. They managed this through posing a naive question, which ostensibly looked innocent as though they were pursuing the truth, but in reality their aim was to mislead the camp of belief into reconsidering their position, suggesting to them that the case was debatable. That is, it was not watertight. Nevertheless, the forces of belief were steadfast in adhering to their belief, so much so that the opposing forces had no alternative but to reveal their true face, a face of unbelief, arrogance, and violent reaction:

The leaders of the arrogant party among his people said to those who were reckoned powerless – those among them who believed:

> **Know ye indeed that Saleh is a messenger from his Lord?" They said: "We do indeed believe in the revelation which hath been sent through**

**him. The Arrogant party said: "For our part, we reject what ye believe in.** [7:75–76]

## Guile and evil

We would like to dwell a while on this point to ponder this method, which we may encounter from the forces of unbelief and misguidance. We may be approached in a seemingly nice way as to whether we are serious in what we believe in or in the issues we raise. They may be patronizing by claiming that we are wise, educated, and knowledgeable enough to reject such recipes for belief.

They are the same age-old devious methods used to play down the question of belief and doctrine, portraying it as though it detracts from man's intellectual powers. Many, who see through the eyes of others or are receptive to such smooth talk, may unwittingly fall victim to these ways.

There is no objection to resorting to these methods with the dishonest among our doctrinal adversaries because of the irrational foundation on which they seem to be anchoring their unbelief, polytheism, and misguidance. The Holy Qur'an has made many references to this state of affairs in its dialogue with the unbelievers and the polytheists, asking them to leave the judgement to their intellects, which would tell them that the objectionable beliefs they hold are irrational.

[The second point is] the attempt by the unbelievers to raise the question of Saleh's social standing and how it was undermined by his "claim" of prophecy, in that they no longer had confidence in him. This was a tactic to persuade Saleh to give up on them and abandon his mission.

> **They said: 'O Saleh! Thou hast been of us a centre of our hopes hitherto! Dost thou (now) forbid us the worship of what our fathers worshipped? But we are really in suspicious (disquieting) doubt as to that to which thou invitest us'.** [11:62].

Yet he responded to them with the logic of the Message. This is because the situation was crystal clear to him, on the one hand, and entrusting him with delivering the Message was a Divine grace, on the other hand. He looked at it this way: whatever he was presumably going to lose in social status, was going to be offset by the reward he was expecting from God. He was absolutely sure that there was nothing they

could do to rescue him from the punishment of God for flouting His commands and taking up his people's proposition, had he decided to do so:

> **He said: 'O my people! Do ye see? If I have a Clear (Sign) from my Lord and He hath sent Mercy unto me from Himself, who then can help me against God if I were to disobey Him? What then would ye add to my (portion) but perdition?'** [11:63].

## Taking advantage of weaknesses

As we have done in the previous point, we would like to pause a little while here, to explore the method Saleh's people used with him. In this method lurks a great danger that might threaten the Muslim activists, especially those who are vulnerable to matters of personal dignity, which are determined by social values and norms.

The activists might be tempted into believing that remaining faithful to the task of calling people to God's way might cause them to lose their social positions. The scaremongers try to give the impression that the two, i.e. the task and social rank, are incompatible. That is, society has devised certain mechanisms and criteria to value and judge its members. Naturally, what society has come to recognize as a quality should not necessarily mean that it is harmonious with that called for by religious dictates. However, what seems to be the believers' lot nowadays are words like reactionary, backward and traitor, whereas descriptions such as progressive, outward looking, patriotic and faithful have come to characterize those in the opposite camp.

Some people may come to terms with this tendency, especially when they are cocooned, keeping a distance from the principles of the Message, as this situation has a bearing on the relationship between man and Message. That is, when the personal and social position take precedence over matters of belief. Such people can easily fall prey to sweet words as quickly as salt dilutes in water.

As the Qur'anic verses seem to suggest, the activists should keep abreast of their belief and message in life. This can provide them with the requisite strength to judge matters critically, in which case they will soon find out that it is wrong to subject "self-assurance" to the standards and norms of falsehood, instead of the criteria and ideals of the truth. The Muslim activists should be firm in the knowledge that the trust of the believers in them is the real worth of one's confidence. The ones on the

opposite side should rest assured that they are worthless in the eye of the true believers, for the devious methods they practise to bring pressure to bear on the believers to shake their confidence in themselves, is a foregone conclusion.

## Abraham and His People

There is another prophet of outstanding quality in the eye of God, as is apparent from the many superlatives used in his praise. This is just one of these descriptions, i.e. where God announces that He has taken Abraham (a.s.) for a friend:

> **Who can be better in religion than one who submits his whole self to God, does good, and follows the way of Abraham the true in Faith? For God did take Abraham for a friend. [4:125].**

There is a plethora of references to Prophet Abraham (a.s.) in the Holy Qur'an, to the extent that his name or story are mentioned in no fewer than twenty chapters. In these chapters many aspects of his personality and life are discussed. His dialogues, be they soul-searching, those with his Lord, his people, the dictator of his age (Nimrod), or with the angels who brought him the news of what would be the fate of the people of Prophet Lot (a.s.) and gave him glad tidings of granting him offspring in old age.

Examining Abraham's story offers many different approaches to dialogue in the process of discharging one's responsibility in calling to the way of God, or expressing oneself in matters pertaining to the faith. In Abraham's personality, the human prophet, as he lived all his life feeling the presence of God around him, we will discover that, to him, duty came before personal feelings, even in the most heightened situations where emotions could run high and take hold over the person.

### Soul-searching

As has already been discussed, Abraham (a.s.) conducted dialogue in three different situations. They were: (a) his soul-searching dialogue to find the path to God, (b) his dialogue with God to tread the road to belief that stemmed from the heart and mind, and (c) his dialogue with his people, in the wake of his destruction of their idols, where he confronted them with strong evidence of the fallacy of both their beliefs and conduct in life.

We have concluded that Abraham's experience should provide Muslim activists with a good vehicle in the cause of God. Abraham's

soul-searching method should serve as an example that should be followed by the activists by creating the right conditions for dialogue in cultural and ideological seminars and other avenues where the activists come face to face with the masses and get acquainted with what concerns them. The participants may start their intellectual exchanges where the activists are in it to sharpen their wits as they are on a learning curve, ensuring that the other party should feel assured that they are not about to enter into a bruising brawl.

In so doing, the other party to the dialogue would be able to discover their fault without any qualms. To a certain degree this is akin to a reader of a book or a novel who comes to empathize with the characters of the story, which may lead in the end to discovering his own self and where he has gone wrong as a result. This approach, i.e. soul-searching, can be advocated in writings that are intended to express the views on doctrinal matters, be they for or against. Instead of the direct preaching style, soul-searching and soliloquy could be used.

Putting this approach to use should form the building blocks for the literature of Islamic call, guided by the Qur'anic experience, both in form and content. This would be in an effort to mix and cause the interaction of artistic tools for literary work with the practical basis for calling to the way of God.

## Ideology and belief

In Abraham's dialogue with his Lord we may find an excellent example of how one can go about calling to the way of God. He asked his Lord to physically show him how He brought the dead to life again, so that he could have peace of mind. This approach should teach us how to handle the reactions of others to the ideas we raise with them. That is, we have to be fully satisfied that the strength of evidence we offer others to embrace our ideology should sink in their minds. Yet we should appeal to their hearts for the same objective and in the same measure. Only then should we feel secure in the knowledge that others would experience spiritual peace and security. Thus, we should not be taken aback if we are confronted with requests, such as the one Abraham asked his Lord to accomplish. God did not find Abraham's request the least outrageous because he was sincere in his request to achieve certitude in his faith.

As you would expect, we are not in a position to entertain others' requests in showing them a miracle along the same lines as God did with His prophet. Nevertheless, we can provide them with clear-cut ideas that

are very close to their day-to-day situations. This will make them feel that the question of belief is with them, hand in hand with all that they do and in the relations they develop with others.

This explains the need for the activists to be in constant interaction with reality, so that they can understand it and deal with it as though it were a raw material necessary for manufacturing a product. This would lead us to breathe life into modes of religious instructions and raise awareness in the fields of knowledge. That done, we would be sure of success in extricating our work practices in the way of God from intellectual inertia, which might turn it into inanimate relics stacked in the museums of thought.

Putting this approach into practice would make it desirable not to stop at the thought and rulings we have inherited from bygone generations, which have acquired the eminence of being "public records". Those "records" have become so rigid that whoever had the experience of reading them would feel as though they were going through a document that had been committed to memory.

What gives us the confidence to reach such a conclusion is that the Qur'anic approach has opened up on life in all its fields, small and large, be it cosmic phenomena or public/individual life, only to exhibit the evidence of the existence of God and of the great human values.

This approach, which has come about as a result of extensive experiments, leads us to realize that there may be other means that are waiting to be discovered on the way of our life, which is ever-changing and ever-developing in every department. That is, although the truth is an ever-fixed reality, yet the routes that may lead to it are not the exclusive preserve of a particular time, place, or individual. We might, in this regard, be inspired by these wise words, *"The roads that lead to God are as many as there are human souls. And if men of old came to discover some truths, they have left out many others for us to uncover and impart to others".*

## Seizing opportunities to engage in dialogue

The third type of approach Prophet Abraham (a.s.) espoused was the one he conducted with his people after he had torn down their idols. We may borrow this approach in certain situations where we feel the need to throw ourselves into the breach to engage the opponents in dialogue on those matters they seem to have failed to notice. Having conducted the

dialogue, we may come out with conclusive evidence of their flawed argument or wanting conduct. Thus, they might be pushed into taking one of two positions: either (a) accepting the truth, or (b) showing open arrogance and intransigence, which is liable to make them lose their self-esteem and the respect of others. This in turn would minimize their capacity to influence others to walk the road of misguidance and deviation.

While advocating this approach we should not lose sight of opening the door on others' ideologies and practices, in order to discover their strengths and weaknesses to make use of them in the battles of dialogue in the cause of faith.

These are some of the practical aspects of Abraham's dialogues we can make use of. There were other modes of dialogue Abraham (a.s.) used with his people. However, the Qur'an does not mention in detail all that his people talked about. It has, though, made references to their stances. Their viewpoint was contained in the answer, or it can be detected from the universally known belief of polytheism. The Qur'an has touched on the latter, be it in the story of Abraham (a.s.) or other prophets at large, as has already been discussed in the section "Dialogue with the Polytheists".

### Standing up against the campaigns of harassment and scaring tactics

Let us dwell on these Qur'anic verses, which show some aspects of dialogue:

> **His people disputed with him. He said: "(Come) ye to dispute with me, about God, when He (Himself) hath guided me? I fear not (the beings) ye associate with God: Unless my Lord willeth, (nothing can happen). My Lord comprehendeth in His knowledge all things. Will ye not (yourselves) be admonished? How should I fear (the beings) ye associate with God, when ye fear not to give partners to God without any warrant having been given to you? Which of (us) two parties hath more right to security? (Tell me), if ye know. It is those who believe and confuse not their beliefs with wrong – that are (truly) in security, for they are on (right) guidance". [6:80–82]**

As we read these verses, we come to the conclusion that the polytheists wanted to instil fear into Abraham's heart that their gods might harm him. They urged him to desist from challenging their associates and beliefs under the pretext of caring about his safety from the revenge of

the gods that could be unleashed against him. It seems that they were under the illusion that their gods could harm those who dared to resist them, as is evident from the assertions of Noah's people, thus:

> **We say nothing but that (perhaps) some of our gods may have seized thee with imbecility. [11:54].**

Abraham seized this misguided notion to fight back. He made it clear to them that his relationship with God was not built as a result of needing to vent psychological pressure on belief. Rather, it came about from God's guidance, which enlightened his heart and mind with belief, thus responding to the light coming from God's realm.

He started the dialogue with them from the question of fear and security, leaving them without any doubt that he did not fear their gods, regardless of the power they alleged their gods had. That is, God alone is the Creator of everything and the possessor of the power therein; nothing can bring benefit or cause harm, except with His will.

He countered their argument of warning him of the harm their gods might cause him, using the same ammunition, by raising the spectre of fear of God in their hearts for setting up partners to Him without warrant. He concluded by posing them the question of a sense of security, that one can protect oneself from the partners with one's own strength, which draws on that of God, or through His power, if one cannot put up a defence. That is the source of feeling secure. Conversely, how could the polytheists enjoy security before God's wrath and might, which none can withstand.

As a result, security was the share of the believers, who did not tamper their belief with oppression, because the sense of security had been based on sound and strong foundation.

Since that dialogue was conducted between polytheism and monotheism, it would certainly have a bearing on the present day stand-off between the forces of belief and those of unbelief and misguidance. This is particularly so, when the defeatists' challenges are being issued to the believers to weaken their resolve in calling to the way of God and belief, under the pretext of fearing for their safety from the forces of unbelief and misguidance, which possess all the material power, whereas the believers have none of that. This, the apologists maintain, may possibly shake up the position of the believers and deal a blow to their morale, leaving them paralysed.

This method can also be used with the waverers among the believers who have had a nervous breakdown and whose morale has collapsed under the weight of the overwhelming forces of unbelief. Thus, they have been lulled into a false sense of security, preferring to stick it out with those who have lost their way, rather than adhering to the truth in adversity.

There may be a need for the approach to dialogue that Abraham (a.s.) used with his people on the question of security and insecurity, with a view to bringing the waverers back to the fold of belief. Abraham managed to revive in them the strength of belief in the Omnipotent to the exclusion of any other power. Then and now, believers are capable of standing up to the forces of defeatism and be counted. As the Qur'an has put it:

> **Men said to them: "A great army is gathering against you": And frightened them: But it (only) increased their Faith: They said: "For us God sufficeth, and He is the best disposer of affairs". And they returned with Grace and bounty from God: no harm ever touched them: For they followed the good pleasure of God: And God is the Lord of bounties unbounded. It is only the Evil One that suggests to you the fear of his votaries: Be ye not afraid of them, but fear Me, if ye have Faith.** [3:173-175]

## Abraham's dialogue with his father

We move to Abraham's (a.s.) dialogue with his father, who was an unbeliever[1] like his people. In his work to the way of God, Abraham (a.s.) felt a priority to start calling on his father to embrace the faith, because his father's remaining in the camp of unbelief could weaken his position, create problems that could impede his work, or bring about unexpected problems.

When it started, the dialogue was facing some problems for it was between father and son, in a society that attached a great value to the parents, so much so that their position verged on the sacred. It required

[1]Commentators of the Holy Qur'an disagree as to the person whom Abraham called "father": Was it his real father or his uncle who raised him after his father died? Those of the commentators who do not wish to subscribe to the idea that it was his father, maintain that all the fathers of the prophets must be believers, quoting this verse in support of their argument: **"And thy movement among those who prostrate themselves"** [26:219]. While we reserve judgement on this opinion, we do not find it necessary to explore it because it has no bearing on the subject matter we are discussing.

the offspring to show unreserved submission to the will of the parents. As a result, Abraham (a.s.) was a little cautious. He was careful not use any inflammatory language, which might have been interpreted as injurious to his father's person. Instead, the dialogue was high on the emotional, bordering on the entreating. You can tell that he was addressing a person who was very dear to his heart, and who was on the brink of falling into the abyss. The atmosphere was amicable:

> **(Also) mention in the Book (the story of) Abraham: He was a man of Truth, a prophet. Behold, he said to his father: "O my father! Why worship that which heareth not and seeth not, and can profit thee nothing? O my father! To me hath come knowledge which hath not reached thee: so follow me: I will guide thee to a way that is even and straight. O my father! Serve not Satan: for Satan is a rebel against (God) Most Gracious. O my father! I fear lest a Penalty afflict thee from (God) Most Gracious, so that thou become to Satan a friend". (The father) replied: "Dost thou hate my gods, O Abraham? If thou forbear not, I will indeed stone thee: Now get away from me for a good long while!" Abraham said: "Peace be on thee: I will pray to my Lord for thy forgiveness: for He is to me Most Gracious. And I will turn away from you (all) and from those whom ye invoke besides God: I will call on my Lord: perhaps, by my prayer to my Lord, I shall be not unblessed". [19:41–48]**

As can be read, Abraham tried to attribute the invitation to his father to embrace belief to the knowledge he had, of which his father had none. Thus, there was no social objection to the son calling his father to faith without encroaching on the position of parenthood. He had further reasons to engage his father in dialogue, in that his concern was for his father, should he continue maintaining his unyielding and misguided position, in which case he would earn God's punishment.

His father's response sprang from a feeling of heavy-handedness bestowed by a parent's authority, which allowed the father to coerce his son to follow in his footsteps, threatening him with expulsion, should he not acquiesce. Thus, dialogue was non-existent. Instead, a command-and-obey style of relationship ruled supreme. This was the norm then, a relationship that was almost teetering on the master/slave one.

Nevertheless, Abraham (a.s.) did not relent and continued to maintain amicable ties with his father. He succeeded in reining in his feelings and blending them with his duty to deliver his father from the darkness he

was in. Yet, when he saw no hope of his father mending his ways, despite his prayer for him to be guided aright, he declared that he would have nothing to do with his father, his own people, and the gods they worshipped, having discharged his duty towards them to the best of his ability.

Abraham's prayer for his father to be forgiven his sins stemmed from his feeling that he might change his mind and go back to God. It had never crossed his mind that his relationship with his father would entitle the father to a special treatment. That is why he disavowed his father after he had exhausted all efforts in persuading him to join the camp of belief, and the fact that he was an arch-enemy of God.

In our work for the way of God, we can make use of this approach in countering the animosity of the people who relate to us in one way or the other. We can always let the atmosphere of kindness and love prevail in dialogue. This is capable of making the other party respond to the amiable climate, without giving in to our emotions to run the encounter, in which case we may unwittingly end up serving the interests of unbelief and misguidance. A good-natured style in such circumstances should not be taken to mean that it is a result of a spontaneous emotional need. Rather, it is part and parcel of a well-thought-out plan, whose characteristics are flexibility, understanding, and steadfastness.

In this light, it is desirable that we give this approach a boost in situations where firmness is called for. This is because some people might exploit the emotional side for something that does not serve the interests of the calling to the way of God, in the same way Abraham used the other approach. We should never lose sight of the fact that the overriding concern should be for keeping the dialogue guided by the wisdom with which God wants to permeate the work in His cause. In the end, we may feel the need to create the right conditions for the spiritual, in that parties to the dialogue should be reminded of God's Grace and the activists should engage in supplication to win the other party over, by the example of humility, whispered prayer, and submission.

### Abraham's dialogue with his son

Ishmael (a.s.) was a grace from God bestowed on Abraham (a.s.) for a prayer he offered His Lord, thus:

> **O my Lord! Grant me a righteous (son)!' So We gave him the good news of a boy ready to suffer and forbear"** [37:101–02].

He lived alongside his father, sharing the father's responsibilities and duties, accepting with him the covenant with God for them to build His House, thus:

> **Remember We made the House a place of assembly for men and a place of safety; and take ye the station of Abraham as a place of prayer; and We covenanted with Abraham and Ishmael, that they should sanctify My House for those who compass it round, or use it as a retreat, or bow, or prostrate themselves (therein in prayer). [2:125]**
>
> **And remember Abraham and Ishmael raised the foundations of the House (With this prayer): "Our Lord! Accept (this service) from us: For Thou art the All- Hearing, the All-Knowing. Our Lord! Make of us Muslims, bowing to Thy (Will), and of our progeny a people Muslim, bowing to Thy (will); and show us our place for the celebration of (due) rites; and turn unto us (in Mercy), for Thou art the Oft-Returning, Most Merciful. Our Lord! Send amongst them an Apostle of their own, who shall rehearse Thy Signs to them and instruct them in Scripture and Wisdom, and sanctify them: For Thou art the Exalted in Might, the Wise". [2:127–29]**

Thus, it can be said that Ishmael was shoulder to shoulder with his father in his divine mission and his spiritual activity, in as much as he was shadowing him in his public life – a faithful and devoted son.

## A manifest trial

There was a trial in the making to test both father and son. They were put in a position that would shake the innermost convictions and feelings of any human. Abraham (a.s.) had a dream in which he was ordered by God to slay his son, Ishmael; to prophets, dreams were a kind of divine revelation.

What was the reaction of Abraham, the prophet and father at the same time? He was facing a gigantic task, which was challenging his feelings, with a view to giving his prophetic role an extra dimension.

Did the two roles, those of father and of messenger, clash? Was there an internal struggle between the two personalities, after he had experienced tense moments as to which side of his personality he would favour – father or prophet? The personality of the prophet won.

> **The Holy Qur'an did not allude to this side, for almost certainly that perceived internal struggle did not take place. This could be**

**attributed to the fact that although the personas of the prophets are one, yet they are multi-faceted, all leading to God's love and pleasure. This was manifest in the personality of Abraham (a.s.): "Behold! His Lord said to him: 'Bow (thy will to Me):' He said: 'I bow (my will) to the Lord and Cherisher of the Universe'. [2:131].**

There was nothing to it, apart from submitting all to God, in person, offspring, possessions etc. So, if it was God's wish that he slew his son, then so be it. This was no different from acting upon any other command, which did not entail any emotional dimension.

The father approached the son with the news of the Divine ordinance and while in conversation, the father wished that his son would respond positively to the command.

**He said: "O my son! I see in vision that I offer thee in sacrifice: Now see what is thy view!" [37:102].**

What was the reaction of his son? Did he ask to be given time to think things over? No, it was the same reaction as the father had showed to the Divine command. It was the will of God. So, let us welcome it with all submission, forbearance, and strong faith:

**(The son) said: 'O my father! Do as thou art commanded: thou will find me, if God so wills one practising patience and constancy!'. [37:103].**

There the mission ended for it was already resolved that the dream/ revelation should not entail executing the command to the letter. The whole process should stop at the scene of starting the slaying. Thus, the Divine order came to Abraham (a.s.) to refrain from going ahead with it:

**So, when they had both submitted their wills (to God), and he had laid him prostrate on his forehead (for sacrifice), We called out to him "O Abraham! Thou hast already fulfilled the vision!" – thus indeed do We reward those who do right. For this was obviously a trial – And We ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice: And We left (this blessing) for him among generations (to come) in later times: "Peace and salutation to Abraham!" Thus indeed do We reward those who do right. [37:104–10)**

## Unconditional submission

The importance of the short dialogue that took place between Abraham and his son Ishmael lies in the fact that it paints a picture of the

frame of mind with which Abraham received the command of his Lord, and that with which Ishmael received his father's. That is, the father should slay the son; the latter should offer himself to help his father carry out the Divine order.

The moral of this tale is that it portrays the calmness of prophetic noble task, when the prophets submit to God's will. It is a striking example of the uniformity of position between the human-prophet and the human-believer in theory and practice. This proves that the prophets did not talk only theoretically about sacrifice in the way of God. Rather, they went forth to translate the theory into real life situations. Any description falls short of giving a complete and true picture for this case, apart from the Holy Qur'an, which has done just that in the following verse.

## Diverse styles

> **God says: "And Abraham prayed for his father's forgiveness only because of a promise he had made to him. But when it became clear to him that he was an enemy to God, he dissociated himself from him: for Abraham was most tenderhearted, forbearing". [9:114].**

It is noteworthy that this verse is indicative of a one-to-one dialogue style, i.e. between Abraham (a.s.) and his father. However, the style took a different turn when they were engaged in dialogue in the presence of others. The tempo would be raised or lowered according to the plan put in place. Here, in these verses, is an example of this:

> **Behold! He said to his father and his people, "What are these images, to which ye are (so assiduously) devoted?" They said, "We found our fathers worshipping them". He said, "Indeed ye have been in manifest error – ye and your fathers". They said, "Have you brought us the Truth, or are you one of those who jest?" He said, "Nay, your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, He Who created them (from nothing): and I am a witness to this (Truth). And by God, I have a plan for your idols – after ye go away and turn your backs". [21:52–57]**

He addressed them in another verse, thus:

> **Is it a falsehood – gods other than God – that ye desire?" [37:86].**

The mood here is unwavering and direct; the main thrust of which seemed to be that of reciprocity – force for force. However, in another

verse, it is noticeable that his tone was mild yet tough. Abraham (a.s.) appeared to make an intelligent and sudden move, intending to switch the atmosphere from dialogue on idols to the ambience of a scene where he was in God's audience in total submission, only to numerate His favours to him, suggesting that man's fate is in God's hands. After this, he immediately moved to saying a special prayer, invoking Him, with utter humility, to answer it. This is a manifestation of the spiritual experience belief instils in man's life:

> **And rehearse to them (something of) Abraham's story. "Behold", he said to his father and his people: "What worship ye?" They said: "We worship idols, and we remain constantly in attendance on them". He said: "Do they listen to you when ye call (on them), or do you good or harm?" They said: "Nay, but we found our fathers doing thus (what we do)". He said: "Do ye then see whom ye have been worshipping, Ye and your fathers before you? For they are enemies to me; not so the Lord and Cherisher of the Worlds; who created me, and it is He Who guides me; Who gives me food and drink, and when I am ill, it is He Who cures me; Who will cause me to die, and then to life (again); and who, I hope, will forgive me my faults on the Day of Judgement.**
>
> **"O my Lord! Bestow wisdom on me, and join me with the righteous; grant me honourable mention on the tongue of truth among the latest (generations); make me one of the inheritors of the Garden of Bliss; forgive my father, for that he is among those astray; and let me not be in disgrace on the Day when (men) will be raised up; The Day whereon neither wealth nor sons will avail, but only he (will prosper) that brings to Allah a sound heart; those apostles We endowed with gifts, some above other". [26:69–89].**

We can make use of this style of dialogue in calling people with whom we have emotional ties. This terse Qur'anic dialogue has illustrated how one can handle similar situations with clarity of vision and purpose. We can experience the atmosphere of this dialogue and emulate it in real life situations.

As we live the scene, where belief rules supreme, doing away with all feelings of worry and uncertainty, we might also make the connection between this scene, of Abraham (a.s.) and his son, with that of Noah (a.s.) and his son. Here, one can detect some distinctions and differences between the two prophets, although each of whom has a lofty station with His Lord, thus:

**"Those messengers We endowed with gifts, some above others" [2:252].**

The ultimate moral we should derive from experiencing this scene is that it symbolizes the highest echelon of ideals that Islamic education should build on, i.e. in marrying the principles and the practicalities of life and making them interact. This should be so in order that believing generations would follow the examples of active and pioneering religious history as well as original religious instructions, so much so that the body of concepts and ideals would be regarded as having a bearing on, and significance for, the lives of the believers, not abstract ideals *per se*.

## Abraham's dialogue with Nimrod

Prophet Abraham (a.s.) was a contemporary of a vicious and despotic ruler. The latter was so arrogant that he thought himself a god, who should be worshipped to the exclusion of the One God. Although the Qur'an did not mention his name, yet religious stories of the prophets call him Nimrod. However, name or no name is of little, if no, importance, because significance emanates from people who set good examples in the decisive positions and original experiments they represent.

In his dialogue, Abraham was unequivocal in his position with Nimrod. Abraham raised with him the question of divinity and how it is linked to Omnipotence, which Nimrod, the dictator, would have none of. Arguing the question of life and death, Abraham put his case that it is God, his Lord, who causes life and death. The tyrant seized the opportunity to play with words and replied that he could cause people to die or live, in that he could reprieve a person who was sentenced to death, or execute him, thus causing him to die. He concluded that, in that regard, he was not different from Abraham's God.

Abraham did not leave him to bask in what he perceived to be a triumph over him. He mounted a determined challenge against him. Natural phenomena are of God's making. So, he challenged him into changing the course of the sun in its rising and setting. Could he cause it to rise from the west? Nimrod was left speechless. This is how the Holy Qur'an describes the dialogue between the two men:

**Hast thou not turned thy vision to one who disputed with Abraham about his Lord, because God had granted him power? Abraham said: "My Lord is He Who Giveth life and death". He said: "I give life and**

**death". Said Abraham: "But it is God that causeth the sun to rise from the East: Do thou then cause him to rise from the West". Thus, was he confounded who (in arrogance) rejected faith. Nor doth God give guidance to a people unjust.** [2:258]

## Sabotaging the plan of deception

The message we can get from Prophet Abraham's dialogue with Nimrod is that we should be able to counter those who attempt to falsify the truths, whether they are ones that relate to doctrinal issues or those that have a bearing on matters of life. No doubt, those quarters aim to pull the wool over the eyes of the naive among people. So, by focusing the debate on matters that are crystal clear, we can contribute to denuding the tactics of the misguided and the devious.

In achieving this goal, we should be conversant with the methods of misguidance that target simple people. We should also be familiar with the direct and straightforward ways that are capable of countering the slyness of the deceitful. These ways should be sound and strong enough as not be undermined or resisted. This, of course, requires the activists to keep up to date with the changing scene of life and the laws that govern it and guide its steps, in full conscience, comprehensiveness, and openness.

## The prophetic preponderance

Discussing the dialogue in the story of Prophet Abraham (a.s.) represents [just] one aspect of his life, because our purpose has been to examine the characters that bore the responsibility of calling to the way of God, not to make an exhaustive study of their lives. However, we have managed to reap good results regarding the approach to dialogue in the way of God and the dynamic aspects of work in His cause.

As we conclude the narrative about Abraham, we must reiterate that his brilliant moral fibre struck an accord with God, in that he was calling to mind the feeling of the relationship between the Creator and the created, so much so that you can feel that mood. To him, God existed in every corner of his life – while eating or drinking, in sickness or in health, in this life or the hereafter, and in life and death. This is so because he felt the dire need for God's help in everything, especially in his work in delivering the Divine message he was entrusted with, which needed a lot of effort and sacrifices.

Perhaps, the strength of his character and spirit made him overcome with forcefulness and serenity of mind all the situations that confronted him in his life, without letting fear find a way to his heart.

This is the practical outcome we get from Abraham's mission in life, which we should put to use in cultivating and shaping the Islamic devout person so that they can discharge their responsibility of Islamic work for the Message and life alike, from a position of submission to God in word and deed.

## Dialogue in the Story of Moses

The story of Moses (a.s.) occupies more space in the Holy Qur'an, so much so that it has been mentioned in some thirty places. The significance it has for our ever-changing world is that, with his strong character, Moses entered life at a very turbulent and difficult period right from his birth. His was a society that was oppressed and subdued. From his earliest years, he lived a life that was far from perfect. These experiences he lived to tell of. They hardened his iron resolve to face up to the difficult situations of life, a life that as soon as the struggle had pulled it away would revert to finding solace in God Almighty.

### A critical situation

Before he was revealed to, Moses had lived a hard life that had made an impact on his character. He had experienced some concern and uncertainty about Pharaoh's might and his overwhelming presence over the heads of his people.

Although he felt rather apprehensive when he was entrusted with delivering the Divine Message to Pharaoh, yet he was up to the task of propagating true belief in God, in that, in discharging his responsibility, he wanted to draw on the strength of God as well as on that of his brother. His frame of mind is brilliantly captured in the following Qur'anic verses that describe his dialogue with his Lord:

> **"Go thou to Pharaoh, for he has indeed transgressed all bounds". (Moses) said: "O my Lord! Expand me my breast; ease my task for me; and remove the impediment from my speech, so they may understand what I say: And give me a Minister from my family, Aaron, my brother; add to my strength through him, and make him share my task: That we may celebrate Thy praise without stint, and remember Thee without stint: For Thou art He that (ever) regardeth us".** [20:24–35]

As the verses suggest, although Moses did not turn down the job, yet he was not sure that he would be able to carry it out to the required standard. That is, delivering the Message should be given its due regard, as it needed awareness of the surrounding circumstances, a foresight into

the future and, above all, an articulate person who could put the message across with finesse. In another verse, you can see him pleading with God that there were things that might render him unsuitable for the job, such as he had already killed a man, thus:

> **And (further), they have a charge of crime against me; and I fear they may slay me. [26:14].**

Thus, his requests from God were dictated by his own circumstances. He asked his Lord to:

> **Expand for me my breast; ease my task for me; and remove the impediment from my speech, so they may understand what I say: And give me a Minister from my family, Aaron, my brother; add to my strength through him, and make him share my task", so that both of them could share the responsibility from a position of strength. The response came from God, thus: "Allah said: 'Granted is thy prayer, O Moses!'. [20:36].**

In the second chapter of the story, we come across Moses and Aaron standing shoulder to shoulder, when Aaron was charged with the task of giving support to his brother in delivering the Message. Both the brothers expressed their feeling as to the gigantic task that was put on their shoulders:

> **Go, thou and thy brother, with My Signs, and slacken not, either of you, in keeping Me in remembrance. Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, for he has indeed transgressed all bounds; but speak to him mildly; perchance he may take warning or fear (God)". They (Moses and Aaron) said: "Our Lord! We fear lest he hasten with insolence against us, or lest he transgress all bounds". He said: "Fear not: for I am with you: I hear and see (everything). So go ye both to him, and say, 'verily we are apostles sent by thy Lord: Send forth, therefore, the Children of Israel with us, and afflict them not: with a Sign, indeed, have we come from thy Lord! And peace to all who follow guidance! Verily it has been revealed to us that the penalty (awaits) those who reject and turn away'. [20:42–48]**

## Relying on absolute power

Defining the task was made manifestly clear, as Pharaoh overstepped his bounds and pushed his luck. He had to be sent a messenger to convey to him God's words so that he could be brought back to his senses with

that which could appeal to his heart and send shivers down his spine with the threat of use of force of the Almighty, which was capable of destroying his might, if need be.

The Divine design was, first, to appeal to his heart with gentle and loving words, in the hope that he might respond to the call of the truth. The hope was that he might be reminded of God's graces and bounties on him, and of His chastisement.

Moses and Aaron (a.s.) were alarmed that Pharaoh might transgress against them, as he had all the material power in his arsenal, compared to their insignificant one.

God tells them not be afraid because they draw on the Might of the Omnipotent, who bestows power on the powerful, and that He has control over such power and the powerful alike. God further assures them that He is with them in whatever they say or do. Everything happens with His knowledge and under His gaze. He then instructs them what to say.

At the outset, they have to inform Pharaoh of their capacity as the prophets of God, so that he is aware of their identity and whom they represent when they discuss matters with him. The target of their mission and demands would be freeing the Children of Israel, who were oppressed, from the clutches of repression and punishment. After setting them free, they should be given freedom of movement and they should be left with Moses and Aaron to start a new life, away from Pharaoh's repression and excesses. Then the two brothers would present Pharaoh with the miracle that would prove the veracity of their prophecy, cautioning him of God's punishment, should he choose to brand them liars and shun the Words of God

The dialogue between the two messengers and God ended after He had explained to them the terms of reference of their mission, only for the mission to be set on the road of execution. In their capacity as the messengers of God, with a mandate to speak in His name, they started the dialogue with Pharaoh thus:

> **(When this message was delivered, Pharaoh) said: "Who, then, O Moses, is the Lord of you two?" He said: "Our Lord is He Who gave to each (created) thing its form and nature, and further, gave (it) guidance". (Pharaoh) said: "What then is the condition of previous generations?" He replied: "The knowledge of that is with my Lord,**

**duly recorded: my Lord never errs, nor forgets, He Who has made for you the earth like a carpet spread out; has enabled you to go about therein by roads (and channels); and has sent down water from the sky. With it have We produced diverse pairs of plants each separate from the others. 'Eat (for yourselves) and pasture your cattle: Verily, in this are Signs for men endued with understanding. From the (earth) did We create you, and into it shall We return you, and from it shall We bring you out once again'". [20:49–50)**

For a start, Pharaoh chose to ignore any knowledge about the Lord of Moses and Aaron, whose Message they delivered to Pharaoh. Therefore, he tried to ask them about who their Lord was, just to give the impression, before his people, that the issue could relate to some unknown person who might be competing with him. Moses' answer dawned on Pharaoh in an all-encompassing word, putting the questioner in an unenviable situation, i.e. that of an ignorant. How dare he ask such a question when he lives in this magnificent world where everything, be it small or big, testifies to the existence of God. He has given every being and entity in the whole universe the gift of existence. He then organized everything in such a fashion that it serves what it has been created for, according to flawless natural laws.

How can a person deliberately ignore all that, or pretend not to know about it, while everything in existence looks them in the eye. God's presence is in the earth we walk on, in the sky, which sends the rain pouring, turning barren land into one heaving with life and flora. The similitude of such a person who is feigning ignorance, is that of him who closes his eyes to the reality of his own existence.

Pharaoh turned to another question, aiming to divert attention away from the answer he could not provide, to a marginal issue, which was capable of inflaming feelings and creating a climate of animosity against the Message and the messengers. It was that of the destiny of the bygone generations who were not believers. Moses' answer was that only God knew what they did, that it was all recorded, and that they would be called to book to answer for their deeds on the Day of Judgement.

Moses then went back to talk about God, His creation of the earth, which He spread out, adorning it with ways that make it inhabitable and His creation of the heavens, which give nourishment to the earth with the rainwater it sends down to benefit man and animal. He then gave Pharaoh an account of man's journey in life, from the cradle to the grave to standing before God.

This was a skilful move by Moses (a.s.) to corner Pharaoh, who was running away from continuing the discussion on God Almighty, lest Moses should influence those around them who were listening attentively to the arguments and counter-arguments of the two men. Never before was Pharaoh confronted with a call and debate of such nature and intensity.

This dialogue has significance for our work in many respects:

## 1. The activists' task and personal considerations

The activists should not turn their backs on the task of delivering the divine message. This should be the case, regardless of the state of mind they are in. Fear and uncertainty should not be a pretext to abdicate responsibility. They should ponder the matter in the same way Moses (a.s.) did when he was first called up to duty. What he did was to seek audience with God in supplication and prayer, explaining his position that it was not in his capacity to shoulder the full burden of the Message. Thus, he pleaded with God to provide him with the spiritual strength required to be up to an acceptable standard. Moses did not stop there. He appealed for more support, by requesting that the Message be boosted further by another person whom he was sure could help him carry out his mission in the best possible manner.

These Qur'anic verses should provide us with this moral: the activist should not fall victim to his egotism, which would prevent him from seeking outside help with his work, or from accepting the offer of help from others for fear of losing his independence in discharging his duty. He may also think that, in the eye of others, he is not competent enough to shoulder practical responsibilities.

The reason being that the issue of active work in the arena of calling to the way of God is not a personal one. Rather, it is the faith that the activist holds and is responsible for. Accordingly, matters of success or failure are of a public nature rather than a personal one. So, when he decides to roll up his sleeves and enter the fray, he should be prepared to study all the basics that should contribute to making the task a success. This attitude should prevail across the board, be it the people he co-operates with or the means he uses to achieve the objectives. We should emulate Moses when he pleaded with his Lord to let his brother, Aaron, share the responsibility with him. Moses' position encapsulates the highest standards of having a sense of responsibility. He did not have any

qualms about asking for that which would benefit the work in the cause of spreading the message, especially in the areas where Moses found himself lacking.

It is a great Qur'anic lesson for those who, when working in the way of God, wish to look at this work from a personal self-centred perspective. This is bound to preclude a person from joining forces with others, in a bid not to give the impression that they are dependant.

### 2. Feeling the presence of God

God wants the workers in His way to feel His presence in all the situations they may encounter. They should feel His company overseeing their work and that of their adversaries. Feeling God's presence is capable of giving the workers the required boost to combat any feeling of frailty in situations where they come face to face with the challenges and exaggerations of their adversaries. With this sense of security with God, the workers would not feel lonely, nor would they buckle under the pressure of others.

### 3. Two important pillars

In the realm of activity, the workers should espouse the approach that would make the hearts and minds of others respond to the sound of God's words. This should encourage them to be articulate, calm and collected and give them confidence. On the other hand, they should avoid using complex or insensitive language, let alone adopting an annoying posture that is liable to give the impression of indecision and shakiness, which would in turn call for a shaky response. This can be avoided when it is known that the divine message draws on two realistic truths:

(a) The workers should not put any obstacle between themselves and others, be they mental or doctrinal, because this is bound to form a barrier against understanding the message and eventually embracing it. This is very important, in that it should not leave the other side with any excuse that they have not been approached with the message and had it explained thoroughly to them. Should they choose to remain impervious, this shall be their fate:

> **That those who died might die after a clear Sign (had been given), and those who lived might live after a Clear Sign (had been given). [8:42].**

(b) Deep conviction that no matter how arrogant man may become

and how distant he might be from God, there is still the possibility that he can be receptive to the truth and what is good. This is due to the intrinsic good drive within his psyche. Such innate nature is capable of responding to a gentle wake-up call that would send it roaming the spiritual world where tranquillity and reflection rule supreme. For that reason, we should appeal to any person, irrespective of how far they might have deviated from the right path, with the nicest of words and the most gentle of methods, in the hope that they might create the right spiritual conditions for guidance.

This would explain the Divine instruction to Moses and Aaron (a.s.) to talk to Pharaoh in a tender way, in the hope that the nice words would find their way to his heart. Moreover, warning him of an impending divine punishment, should he choose to continue in the way of misguidance, might make him yield.

### 4. Not losing sight of the dialogue's aim

The activists should keep abreast with all the methods the adversaries could use to steer the dialogue away from its main purpose and aim. There, the tactful and clever move should come in to keep the dialogue on course, exactly as Moses (a.s.) did in his dialogue with Pharaoh, as has already been discussed.

### The magicians vs. Pharaoh

We are still with Moses' story. This time, it is the turn of the magicians, whom Pharaoh mobilized from all over his kingdom to counter the Divine miracle Moses had earlier promised to demonstrate as a proof of the veracity of his prophecy. For his part of the deal, Pharaoh promised to reward the magicians, should they triumph over Moses. The magicians showed their wizardry. Moses threw in his staff, which turned into a serpent, devouring all the trickery the magicians had demonstrated. Having realized that what Moses did was not in his power, but a miracle from God, they defected to his side in a sincere and true conversion. Pharaoh was seething with anger, as he suspected that what the magicians did was a conspiracy they had hatched in collaboration with Moses.

Consequently, he did not want to admit that the magicians' conversion to the cause of belief was a genuine one. This, of course, is symptomatic of all tyrants who cannot prove their case with strong

evidence, and who choose not to comprehend that popular response to, and support for, the forces of change that stem from the strength of feeling for change and aspiration to throwing off the yoke of subjugation. Failing that, those despots seem to attribute rebellion against them to what they perceive as scheming by their enemies.

In a bid to intimidate the magicians, Pharaoh resorted to psychological warfare, threatening them with punishment – chopping off their limbs and executing them – to coerce them into changing their minds. The magicians had already resolved the issue. They were not going to budge in the least. Their position was an honourable one, demonstrating clearly what standing firm in faith against the forces of unbelief and tyranny can do.

The following verses tell the tale of the magicians' debate with Pharaoh, and how they first agreed to contest Moses' claim in return for Pharaoh's promised material reward, and how the outcome turned out to be a conversion to Moses' cause:

> **So there came the sorcerers to Pharaoh: They said, "Of course we shall have a (suitable) reward if we win!" He said: "Yea, (and more) for ye shall in that case be (raised to posts) nearest (to my person)". They said: "O Moses! Wilt thou throw (first), or shall we have the (first) throw?" Said Moses: "Throw ye (first)". So when they threw, they bewitched the eyes of the people, and struck terror into them: for they showed a great (feat of) magic. We put it into Moses' mind by inspiration: "Throw (now) thy rod": and behold! It swallows up straight away all the falsehoods that they fake! Thus truth was confirmed, and all that they did was made of no effect. So the (great ones) were vanquished there and then, and were made to look small. But the sorcerers fell down prostrate in adoration, saying: "We believe in the Lord of the Worlds, The Lord of Moses and Aaron". Said Pharaoh: "Believe ye in Him before I give you permission? Surely this is a trick that ye have planned in the city to drive out its people: but soon shall ye know (the consequences). Be sure I will cut off your hands and your feet on opposite sides, and I will cause you all to die on the cross". They said: "For us, We are but sent back unto our Lord: But thou dost wreak thy vengeance on us simply because we believed in the Signs of our Lord when they reached us! Our Lord! Pour out on us patience and constancy, and take our souls unto thee as Muslims (who bow to thy will)!"** [7:113–26]

## A bloody conflict

The Holy Qur'an put us in a different atmosphere with this dialogue, which the previous verses did not touch, thus:

> **So the magicians were thrown down in prostration: they said, "We believe in the Lord of Aaron and Moses". (Pharaoh) said: "Believe ye in Him before I give you permission? Surely this must be your leader, who has taught you magic! Be sure I will cut off your hands and feet on opposite sides, and I will have you crucified on trunks of palm-trees: so shall ye know for certain, which of us can give the more severe and the more lasting punishment!" They said: "Never shall we regard thee as more than the Clear Signs that have come to us, or than Him Who created us! So decree whatever thou desirest to decree: for thou canst only decree (touching) the life of this world. For us, we have believed in our Lord: may He forgive us our faults, and the magic to which thou didst compel us: for God is Best and Most Abiding. Verily he who comes to his Lord as a sinner (at Judgement), for him is Hell: therein shall he neither die nor live. But such as come to Him as Believers who have worked righteous deeds, for them are ranks exalted, Gardens of Eternity, beneath which flow rivers: they will dwell therein for aye: such is the reward of those who purify themselves (from evil)".** [20:70–76]

Pharaoh did not want them to embrace what Moses brought without his permission, as though the process of accepting the faith required his assent, as had been the case with any other activity of life.

This is true of all tyrants at all time and in any place. They always want to overbear on people, even in the way they think because they do not want them to ponder anything else, only regurgitate, instead, what they dish out to them. They do not want them to believe in anything apart from what they want them to follow. Thinking is banned and believing in the Divine is forbidden, except with the seal of approval of the authorities, which seem to have control over the people's bodies as well as their minds.

In an attempt to ameliorate the shock and embarrassment he suffered, for what had happened constituted a blot on his rule, especially the fact that the rebels were among his close circle of followers, Pharaoh tried to play down the significance of the magicians' defection. He tried to portray the situation as though their conversion was not a real challenge

against his authority; rather, it was a joint conspiracy between the magicians and Moses (a.s.) as, according to Pharaoh's words, he was their master who taught them the art of sorcery. Thus, they rallied to their masters' support to announce him the winner over Pharaoh.

Pharaoh's threat to the magicians did not bear fruit, i.e. in making them reconsider their position. They did not yield to Pharaoh's fuming shouts, telling him to his face: We are not going to give you preference over the evidence of the truth we have seen, come what may. Do whatever you want to do with us. Should you decide to kill us, it would not bother us the least, because we would achieve martyrdom in the way of God, for upholding His word. And you, however, are nothing but a mortal; you can neither protect yourself, nor anyone else. By contrast, God is Everlasting and He is the only guarantee, because He is the Owner of everything, including you. Thus, His is the best reward over everything in this world.

That was a great stand of holding fast to belief in adversity. It is an example of the stand-off between the forces of unbelief and tyranny on one side and the forces of the truth and belief on the opposite side.

At this juncture, we feel a great need to reflect on such a stance against the tyrants and their threats. They are attempting to gag Islamic thought, which they do not want people to consider as a source of inspiration except only as far as they determine applicable, i.e. where their interests are served. They want it to be an agreeable façade behind which depraved and wrong practices can be hidden.

Those great examples in the history of the prophetic missions put forward this Qur'anic slogan in practice:

> **Whatever ye are given (here) is (but) a convenience of this life: but that which is with Allah is better and more lasting: (it is) for those who believe and put their trust in their Lord.** [42:36].

## Moses' dialogue with his people

The Holy Qur'an has reported many instances where Moses conducted dialogue with his people on a host of issues. In the main, the majority of his people showed lack of discipline and understanding of his Message. In certain situations, their role was akin to that of a nosy person who raises many questions endlessly, and with no apparent purpose. Had they acquiesced to the divine injunctions, they would not

have ended up having to do more than was originally required of them. Referring to the story of killing a cow, Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) was quoted as saying:

> ***"Should the Israelites have intercepted any cow and slaughtered it [according to God's command], God would have accepted their offering. But, they were so unyielding in their demands, that God was harsh with them.***

This is how the Qur'an has described the story of His command to them to kill a cow:

> **And remember Moses said to his people: "God commands that ye sacrifice a heifer". They said: "Makest thou a laughing-stock of us?" He said: "God save me from being an ignorant (fool)!" They said: "Beseech on our behalf Thy Lord to make plain to us what (heifer) it is!" He said; "He says: The heifer should be neither too old nor to too young, but of middling age. Now do what ye are commanded!" They said: "Beseech on our behalf Thy Lord to make plain to us her colour". He said: "He says: A fawn-coloured heifer, pure and rich in tone, the admiration of beholders!" They said: "Beseech on our behalf Thy Lord to make plain to us what she is: To us are all heifers alike: We wish indeed for guidance, if God wills". He said: "He says: 'A heifer not trained to till the soil or water the fields; sound and without blemish'". They said: "Now hast thou brought the truth". Then they offered her in sacrifice, but not with good will.** [2:67–71]

They were ordered to slaughter a heifer. At first, they did not take the matter seriously. They thought, or pretended to think, that it was a joke. They did not seem to give much weight and reverence to the position of the Prophet (a.s.). They did not seem to make the connection between what they asked about, i.e. of the dispute and finding the killer on the one hand, and the command to kill the cow on the other. Once, they realized that it was serious, they seemed to be treating it as a free play, as might be inferred from the way they put the questions.

Moses (a.s.) handled the situation with calmness and resilience. With every question they asked, the answer came with strings attached, so much so that they ended up incurring a larger than expected expense.

We have to deem this approach as a practical educational tool intended to slam the door in the face of those of Moses' people who took Divine injunctions lightly, by trading questions on their details, so much

so that they felt it was ordinary. Yet, they were taught a lesson that inquisitiveness, be it in jest or earnest, comes at a premium, especially when nosiness emanates from trifling with and encroaching upon the position of authority, where there should be no room for humour, as all its lines of responsibility and terms of reference had been clearly defined; for this reason, it was no laughing matter.

## Asking for clarifications where ambiguity arises

The moral we draw from this situation and dialogue is that Muslim activists should receive the instructions, as simple and clear as they have been outlined, without trying to attach to them extra constraints or stipulations. If the order has been issued with no strings attached, then let it be. If there is blurring of the lines or lack of clarity, the first person in command would bear the responsibility of any wrongdoing. The activists should not be held responsible for something which was not made clear to them at the outset, according to the rational principle "Punishment is repugnant where no clear statement was provided".

There is no objection to the activists' attempts to seek clarification to what they can see hazily, or to what could be interpreted in more than one way, in order to define clearly the boundaries of responsibility from the start to the finish. This should be viewed as part and parcel of a sense of loyalty and responsibility, lest the activists should be lost in the maze of diverse interpretations and probabilities. This, of course, should be confined to the ambiguous of issues, which could leave one grappling with uncertainty and doubt, and which in turn could constitute legal responsibility.

The following story related from Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) should shed some light on what has just been mentioned. He addressed his companions, thus:

> ***Allah has commanded you to perform hajj. Ukasha bin Muhsin, or it was said Suraqa bin Malik stood up and asked: Every year, O you Messenger of God?! The Prophet chose to ignore him, until he repeated the question twice or three times when the Prophet yelled at him: Woe unto you! What guarantee would you have, if I said: Yes. By God, if I said it, it would have become compulsory, and if it did, you could not have put up with it. And if you abandoned such a duty, you would have reneged. Leave out what I have left out. Those, who were before you, were eternally damned because they used to ask a***

> ***lot of, and pounce at, their prophets. So, should I order you to do something, do whatever you possibly can; where I forbade you, keep a distance from that I declared prohibitive.***

In this tradition (*hadith*) there might be a reference to the position of the Israelites vis-ä-vis the question of killing a cow. There might also be a directive to the Muslims to accept the commands and prohibitions without undue questioning, lest they should become tougher on them.

Moses' people confronted him in other situations, which served as pointers to their arrogance, ignorance and childish mentality; these verses tell of yet another story and debate between the two sides:

> **We took the Children of Israel (with safety) across the sea. They came upon a people devoted entirely to some idols they had. They said: "O Moses! Fashion for us a god like unto the gods they have". He said: "Surely ye are a people without knowledge. As to these folk – the cult they are in is (but) a fragment of a ruin, and vain is the (worship) which they practise". He said: "Shall I seek for you a god other than the (true) God, when it is God Who hath endowed you with gifts above the nations?"** [7:138–40]

Did that request make sense, coming from a people whom Moses had just snatched from the jaws of Pharaoh's repression? Were they going to be the building blocks in the edifice Moses had hoped to erect and spread the Word of God and liberate the entire society? As is known, Moses' struggle was not motivated by personal or nationalistic considerations. It came about as a result of executing his prophetic mission, which had found in the masses a good force to move forth and affect change and build a new life. He also had found in the Children of Israel a group of people who were very close to matters of belief, in that they formed the opposition force to Pharaoh, and all the corruption and wrongdoing that he stood for.

This is how the dilemma of Moses (a.s.) with his people should be construed. He was disappointed with them. They let him down, after the fierce struggle he waged against Pharaoh and the difficult situations he went through, not least by escorting them to safety, miraculously, to the other side of the river. So, what sort of request [fashioning of a god] was that? Where did this leave monotheism and the Lord of Moses, professing Whose oneness was the cause of all the upheaval that took place? Were not the miracles they had witnessed sufficient to reinforce

their faith, as the magicians did when they defied Pharaoh in embracing belief and hoisting its banner high?

However, Moses (a.s.) did not lose his temper, because the magnitude of his mission did not leave him any room to cave in to any of his personal feelings. Thus, his answer was two-pronged. While he completely dismissed the idol worshippers as a bunch of misguided people, who would certainly face annihilation and eternal damnation, he warned his people of a severe chastisement. Yet, he reminded them of the favours God bestowed on them, not least by freeing them from the clutches of repression to the light of freedom and security. He made it clear to them that divinity was not a matter for man to exercise wishes or choices whether to stick with this god or that. Divinity is the truth that permeates man's mind and soul and lightens his way.

## Immature mentality

This kind of immature mentality can be found in some Islamic communities, although in a different situation. Some people, among the rulers or others, may come across a new "craze" brought to the fore by the forces of unbelief and misguidance. This might come in the form of a social trend or an ideology propagated by the East or the West. As novelties, some people could be lured by the lustre of these trends, so much so that they wish to mimic them, not for a sensible reason, other than jumping on the bandwagon. This could lead to their making mistakes, if not deviations from the right path, both in their personal as well as public life. For any person to follow this trend or the other is a recipe for disaster, in that they will turn into guinea pigs for a myriad of trendy thoughts. As a consequence, they will lose their character and their way.

This can be clearly seen in how some Islamic societies try to run their lives. You may find such communities where, while thinking on Islamic ideology lines, their social practices run contrary to those ideological lines. This is true of political as well as economic activity. These practices mirror, to a certain degree, the mentality of the Israelites who asked Moses (a.s.) to invent to them gods and norms of life on the same lines that others had, as has already been mentioned in the above-quoted verses.

However, the main thrust of the true divine message prevails in the end. That is, as Moses proved his people wrong then, so it will be this

time round, for the root of the problem is the same, although it may outwardly look different. That is, the truth is one and constant and thus should not be subjected to personal choices. Rather, it is governed by realistic and objective determinants, which would decide whether it would endure or wither away.

Here is another showdown between Moses (a.s.) and his people, which is indicative of their juvenile mentality; they rejected faith because they did not see God manifestly:

> **And remember ye said: "O Moses! We shall never believe in thee until we see God manifestly," but ye were dazed with thunder and lighting even as ye looked on. Then We raised you up after your death: Ye had the chance to be grateful" [2:55–56].**

It is apparent from these verses and others, for that matter, that this issue was the subject of debate between Moses and his people, which led nowhere, in that he was unable to make them relent and come back to the right path from that of arrogance and misguidance. He did not have any alternative but to turn to God in prayer that He might accede to their request of seeing Him. His people, or some of their representatives, whom Moses selected to accompany him in his appointment with God, might have witnessed the sight of Moses pleading with God. There, before God, Moses stood, asking Him, in a direct manner, to grant them their wish. His plan was to put them in the thick of the experience, which was to shock them to the core. That is, it was not possible to see God, for the simple reason that none can stand the Light that He emanates, or any other manifestation of his Might. To this the Qur'an has alluded, i.e. "manifestation of glory", which cannot mean His physical appearance, because it is impossible, in that He is not corporeal:

> **When Moses came to the place appointed by Us, and his Lord addressed him, He said: "O my Lord! Show (Thyself) to me, that I may look upon thee". God said: "By no means canst thou see Me (direct); But look upon the mount; if it abide in its place, then shalt thou see Me". When his Lord manifested His glory on the Mount, He made it as dust. And Moses fell down in a swoon. When he recovered his senses he said: "Glory be to Thee! To Thee I turn in repentance, and I am the first to believe". [7:143]**

The author of *Majma'ul Bayan*, [a Qur'anic commentary] advocates this opinion, which he traces back to the Sunni School of Thought (*al-*

*Jumhour*), i.e. when his people were gripped with shivers, Moses (a.s.) turned to God and said: *Do you punish us for something only the insolent among us has done?* This is indicative of the fact that asking to see God in person was not his idea, in that he attributed it to the impudent among his people. This was a way of continuing the dialogue with them from a different angle, after he had failed to convince them to see sense in a direct way.

This is the opinion we subscribe to, on the basis of what we infer from the exoteric meaning of the Qur'anic verses, on the one hand, and from some traditions, on the other. This, of course, is contrary to the interpretation of many exegetes who did not discern properly the outward meaning of the verses, ending with a mismatch between their own interpretation and what the verses denote.

That aside, what we are trying to underline here is the approach Moses used in his dialogue with his people when they behaved like children and demanded to clearly see God. Since their request did not make sense from an ideological religious viewpoint, especially as they were supposed to be familiar with the notion of monotheism, he had no choice but to use a practical approach, i.e. by making them experience at first hand the response to their request, a quake that shook them to the core and left them no opportunity to say anything else or remain rebellious.

That is why we come across Moses (a.s.) invoking God to pardon him for that request, in that it was a sin that required those who committed it to ask for forgiveness, so that they could return to the fold. This was Moses' way of implying to his people to adopt the same position, being the real culprits behind that abhorrent demand, whose acceptance they made a provision for going back to the right path.

The Holy Qur'an tells of another incident involving the conduct of the Israelites during the absence of Moses to meet his Lord. They took for worship an idol moulded in the image of a calf, and rebelled against his brother, Aaron. This was yet another blot on their record of misguidance, which Moses had to engage them in dialogue on, and which they could not rationally defend:

> **The people of Moses made, in his absence, out of their ornaments, the image of calf, (for worship): it seemed to low: did they not see that it**

**could neither speak to them, nor show them the Way? They took it for worship and they did wrong. When they repented, and saw that they had erred, they said: "If our Lord have not mercy upon us and forgive us, we shall indeed be of those who perish". When Moses came back to his people, angry and grieved, he said: "Evil it is that ye have done in my place in my absence: did ye make haste to bring on the judgement of your Lord?" He put down the tablets, seized his brother by (the hair of) his head, and dragged him to him. Aaron said: "Son of my mother! The people did indeed reckon me as naught, and went near to slaying me! Make not the enemies rejoice over my misfortune, nor count thou me among the people of sin". [7:148–50)**

As is evident they were at a loss. Their position was akin to that of a child who got his hands burned after dabbling in fire and realized his fault after it was too late. We may gather from Moses' showdown with his brother that the people did not treat Aaron as equal to his brother, despite the fact that they were equals. Yet, he [Aaron] could not sway them from the vile deeds they were committing.

In yet another confrontation between Moses and his people, he pleaded with them to fight the tyrannical forces so that they could enter the holy land under their sway. They brushed his plea aside in apparent rudeness:

**Remember Moses said to his people: "O my people! Call in remembrance the favour of God unto you, when He produced prophets among you, made you kings, and gave you what He had not given to any other among the peoples. O my people! Enter the holy land which God hath assigned unto you, and turn not back ignominiously, for then will ye be overthrown, to your own ruin". They said: "O Moses! In this land are a people of exceeding strength: Never shall we enter it until they leave it: if (once) they leave, then shall we enter". (But) among (their) God-fearing men were two on whom God had bestowed His grace: They said: "Assault them at the (proper) Gate: when once ye are in, victory will be yours; But on God put your trust if ye have faith". They said: "O Moses! While they remain there, never shall we be able to enter, to the end of time. Go thou, and thy Lord, and fight ye two, while we sit here (and watch)". "O my Lord! I have power only over myself and my brother: so separate us from this rebellious people!" [5:20–25]**

## Moses turns to God

The Israelites were refusing to respond positively to Moses' call to them to wage jihad, preferring to relax in safety and security, and leaving Moses alone in the battlefield, in a situation similar to when a commander's soldiers desert him in the thick of the fight. This was an indication that they did not attain the level of belief Moses had wished they would reach, especially after all the efforts he put in redeeming them from the clutches of Pharaoh and his repression. Against this background, Moses had no alternative but to turn to God with a final entreaty, for he had exhausted all the ways possible to put his people on the right track.

It seems that Moses was not different from other prophets who had to fight on two fronts, that of the adversaries and that of their own followers. After they had felt that there was nothing more they could do, they had recourse to God to bear witness that they had done their level best, beseeching Him to perpetuate the chasm between them and the corrupt people.

This is the practical lesson the workers in the way of God must learn. When they face rebellion and disappointment, they should feel contented with what they have achieved, never feel sorry, and be satisfied with the effort they put in discharging their responsibility. They should have peace of mind because they have been carrying out God's will in delivering His Message. Their final submission should be before God to present Him with their last report, outlining the effort they put in the work and the problems they encountered. Thus, their mission should either come to an end, or there might be another mission to be had somewhere else.

## Moses' dialogue with the good man

In the last chapter of Moses' story, we linger on his dialogue with a good man he met. This is a unique tale, in which God had desired that Moses be exposed to a completely new experience, which the prophets with missions must handle when faced with unforeseen circumstances.

In a nutshell, the story concludes that behind what the eyes can perceive and the mind conclude, there are hidden matters. Those out of sight things could change the whole picture and consequently the conclusion, i.e. they might turn out to be diametrically opposed to the initial conclusion the person has come up with.

God had willed that Moses should go through this "on-the-job" training with one of God's less famous good servants. God endowed him with wisdom and imparted to him His knowledge. The significance of this experience was that it had a direct bearing on Moses' legislative acumen, i.e. in his capacity as prophet. That is, when giving his rulings on certain issues, he should bear in mind that not all things could be judged by their outward appearance, for once the unknown side was revealed, the outcome would be different. This principle is a common one that is applicable to judgements of a public nature, and those concerning special cases:

> **Behold, Moses said to his attendant, "I will not give up until I reach the junction of the two seas or (until) I spend years and years in travel". But when they reached the junction, they forgot (about) their fish, which took its course through the sea (straight) as in a tunnel. When they had passed on (some distance), Moses said to his attendant: "Bring us our early meal; truly we have suffered much fatigue at this (stage of) our journey". He replied: "Sawest thou (what happened) when we betook ourselves to the rock? I did indeed forget (about) the fish: none but Satan made me forget to tell (you) about it: it took its course through the sea in a marvellous way!" Moses said: "That was what we were seeking after:" So they went back on their footsteps, following (the path they had come).**
>
> **So they found one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed Mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own Presence. Moses said to him: "May I follow thee, on the footing that thou teach me something of the (Higher) Truth which thou hast been taught?" (The other) said: "Verily thou wilt not be able to have patience with me! And how canst thou have patience about things about which thy understanding is not complete?" Moses said: "Thou wilt find me, if God so will, (truly) patient: nor shall I disobey thee in aught". The other said: "If then thou wouldst follow me, ask me no questions about anything until I myself speak to thee concerning it".**
>
> **So they both proceeded: until, when they were in the boat, he scuttled it. Said Moses: "Hast thou scuttled it in order to drown those in it? Truly a strange thing hast thou done!" He answered: "Did I not tell thee that thou canst have no patience with me?" Moses said: "Rebuke me not for forgetting, nor grieve me by raising difficulties in my**

**case". Then they proceeded: until, when they met a young man, he slew him. Moses said: "Hast thou slain an innocent person who had slain none? Truly a foul (unheard of) thing hast thou done!" He answered: "Did I not tell thee that thou canst have no patience with me?" (Moses) said: "If ever I ask thee about anything after this, keep me not in thy company: then wouldst thou have received (full) excuse from my side".**

**Then they proceeded: until, when they came to the inhabitants of a town, they asked them for food, but they refused them hospitality. They found there a wall on the point of falling down, but he set it up straight. (Moses) said: "If thou hadst wished, surely thou couldst have exacted some recompense for it!" He answered: "This is the parting between me and thee: now will I tell thee the interpretation of (those things) over which thou wast unable to hold patience. As for the boat, it belonged to certain men in dire want: they plied on the water: I but wished to render it unserviceable, for there was after them a certain king who seized on every boat by force. As for the youth, his parents were people of Faith, and we feared that he would grieve them by obstinate rebellion and ingratitude (to God and man). So we desired that their Lord would give them in exchange (a son) better in purity (of conduct) and closer in affection. As for the wall, it belonged to two youths, orphans, in the Town; there was, beneath it, a buried treasure, to which they were entitled: their father had been a righteous man: So thy Lord desired that they should attain their age of full strength and get out their treasure – a mercy (and favour) from thy Lord. I did it not of my own accord. Such is the interpretation of (those things) over which thou wast unable to hold patience". [18:60–82]**

We do not want to expand on this story in the way the writers of prophetic stories did, in that we are doing away with trying to know the name of the person whom Moses accompanied on his learning curve – was it al-Khidher or someone else? Where was the place where the fish found its way back to the water, after it had been grilled, as is claimed? All of this does not concern us as what we are dealing with is the subject of dialogue in the Holy Qur'an.

What we have found interesting in this story is the following:

## 1. Sublime ethical values

This can be demonstrated by the humility shown to knowledge and scholars, regardless of the positions in the social or religious hierarchy

the teacher and the student might be occupying. The divine ethics can be found in the gentle words Moses addressed the good man with and the humble request he made to him:

> **"May I follow thee, on the footing that thou teach me something of the (Higher) Truth which thou hast been taught".**

## 2. The direct approach

What is salient in the story is the practical and direct approach the trainer used with his apprentice. It is apparent that the approach was free from any flattery and wiliness that could be dictated by social structures, as is the case nowadays. Devious ways are in vogue, just to impress others and turn them into numbers on the list of followers, in a bid to attach pomp and give aura to the position of the teacher, regardless of whether or not there is benefit to be reaped of his knowledge, or whether the students are up to the standard of making them learn something of substance from their teacher.

That good man was different from others [such as Moses] in the extent of his true knowledge of reality. Although he shared with others the knowledge of the visible side of matters, yet, unlike them, he owned an insight into the invisible side, as in many cases the outward appearance belies the truth. Thus, others either rejected his way of doing things or could not put up with it. As a result, remaining in his company became unrewarding, or so it seemed. Staying with him appeared to generate more controversy, which did not serve anyone's interest, nor did it benefit the truth in the least.

In this light, and at the outset, the good man made it clear that Moses would find most of what he was going to do beyond the pale, for a simple reason, i.e. man might not fathom that which he did not have knowledge about. Thus Moses promised him patience and total obedience. The good man's condition was that Moses should not ask him about anything, unless he said so, no matter how strange it might have looked. That was why their relationship was that of companionship, based on the pursuit of knowledge in a framework of discipline and realism.

## 3. Exemplary discipline

The actions of the good man were testing Moses' patience, not least for believing they were unlawful, especially the incidents of killing the boy and scuttling the boat. The first incident, killing the boy without an

apparent reason, represented a crime against the human soul. The second incident constituted a crime against the property of others, putting other people in harm's way, and neglecting the principle of using one's energy in protecting oneself from hunger, especially those who did not uphold ideals in their public life. Thus, Moses' complaints were unremitting until the last incident, which was preceded by his giving an undertaking to show restraint and the good man's giving Moses (a.s.) the freedom to part company with him should he choose to remain confrontational and show impatience.

This was how the case turned out to be, i.e. Moses' patience snapped. After the good man had stuck to his word of parting company with Moses, he explained to him all the actions he had carried out to which Moses objected, in that God decreed them all and that he was instrumental in implementing them.

However, this study is not concerned with critically evaluating those actions, i.e. whether they were in keeping with the general guidelines of the *Sharia* law, or special cases governed by their own circumstances. All that we are after is to make use of the dialogue we have experienced in making reference to two salient points that have a bearing on the work of the activists in the way of God.

The activists must live and breathe with discipline, patience, and quiet while going about discharging their duties in public life, provided that the parties which they represent or collaborate with are up to the level of confidence all round, i.e. ideologically, religiously, and practically. They should not hasten to object to the orders issued to them, showing displeasure with any actions that might go contrary to what they are familiar with. This sort of reaction might adversely affect the work and result in indiscipline among the ranks of workers. The activists may speak their mind when the time and circumstance are right.

The believers should accept with patience and submission the divine instructions imparted to them, which they may not be used to. This is because God knows best what is good and what is bad. Should they have any lingering thoughts, they can critically examine such thoughts, and then they can explore the rationale behind the instructions, in which case they might arrive at their own conclusions.

# Lot and his People

## Unnatural sexual act

Here is another of those prophets who were sent by God to a particular community with a specific mission. The prime objective of Lot's noble task was to address sodomy, which was prevalent in that community. It threatened the normal conduct that God has desired for mankind to follow in their eating, drinking and all other needs, including sexual pleasure. Pleasure is not a subjective matter, insomuch as it is fulfilled alongside the need for reproduction and preservation of the human race. Should the sexual drive take to perversion, which may stem from a psychological complex, it would divert this desire from being a natural need to something that is concerned with providing personal enjoyment *per se*. Thus, the whole human concern would be confined to deriving pleasure in a variety of depraved ways. This is likely to turn man into a slave to his own desires, which might be motivated by a perverted imagination.

This is the reason why almost all religions have to make homosexuality a forbidden act because this is in keeping with the natural path they want man to walk in, satisfying his natural needs in a normal way.

The Holy Qur'an has given this subject the importance it deserves, where the story of Lot has been mentioned in some eleven chapters, reiterating that sodomy is a repugnant practice because it represents a departure from satisfying one's sexual needs in the way God has preordained. It has been described as a deed that is vile, evil, monstrous and objectionable.

Lot was sent to the people who invented that "fashion". This is apparent from God's words:

> **We also (sent) Lot: He said to his people: 'Do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you? [7:80].**

God did not send a special emissary to address a particular problem, unless it was a threat to ethical, as well as social, life.

As we read this Qur'anic story, with all the bitter dialogue it demonstrates, Lot's efforts become self-evident, in that he tried, by carrot and stick, to make his people desist from the lewd behaviour they were practising; a practice that had had a stranglehold over the entire community. The people of Lot did not only show intransigence, they took their transgression one step further by attacking his guests inside his house. They took advantage of Lot's perceived weak position to commit more excesses against him, since he lacked the means, including personal physical strength and the power base, to defend himself.

## The prophetic approach

His approach was not different from that of other prophets. It was calm, yet forceful. He was so friendly that he offered his daughters to his people in marriage because they were pure. They bluntly turned his offer down because they were not in the right mental frame to adopt a conventional sexual relationship between men and women. As is apparent from Lot's dialogue with them, they appeared to have abandoned their wives.

Yet, when he spoke to them about their immorality, he did not mince his words, as he rebuked them for it. He made it abundantly clear that he was averse to their depraved conduct. This position was characteristic of the prophets. That is, when they reached a dead end with their people, they used to bring the dialogue to an end, by unequivocally distancing themselves from the rebellion and depravity of their people. This is so as not to leave any lingering doubt about where the prophets stand. Also, this position was called for so as not to leave any one with any impression that the prophets wavered in their resolve. At the outset, they were clear of what their noble task involved. They ended their mission as they had started it, with clarity of vision and resoluteness.

The following Qur'anic verses tell of the dialogue between Lot (a.s.) and his people in a number of situations:

> **The people of Lot rejected the messengers. Behold, their brother Lot said to them: "Will ye not fear (Allah)? I am to you a messenger worthy of all trust. So fear Allah and obey me. No reward do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the lord of the Worlds. Of all the creatures in the world, will ye approach males, and leave those whom Allah has created for you to be your mates? Nay, ye are a people transgressing (all limits)!" They said: "If thou desist not, O Lot!**

**Thou wilt assuredly be cast out!" He said: "I do detest your doings. O my Lord! Deliver me and my family from such things as they do!"** [26:160–169]

**And (remember) Lot: behold, he said to his people: "Ye do commit lewdness, such as no people in Creation (ever) committed before you. Do ye indeed approach men, and cut off the highway? And practise wickedness (even) in your councils?" But his people gave no answer but this: they said: "Bring us the Wrath of God if thou tellest the truth". He said: "O my Lord! Help Thou me against people who do mischief!"** [29:28–30)

This is the common approach that had bound all the prophets together, whether they were sent to deliver a universal message or a particular one. That is, the prophet introduced himself as the messenger of God, fully aware of the trust that was put in him and the interest of the people he was sent to. He did not expect to be paid for what he set out to do, as his reward would come from God. All that he needed them to do was to obey him in submitting to God, be pious, and follow the road where their interests lay, both in this world and the hereafter. The prophet appealed to his people to abandon their crooked ways and be on the right path.

This was just what Lot did with his people. He was not surprised at the response he received from them to his invitation to mend their ways. They had become addicted to the lewdness they were doing. It had become ingrained in their psyche. They did not want to talk about giving up the addiction. They accepted neither counsel nor reproach from anyone. To them, the issue was not a matter of right or wrong, good or bad, because it was a deep-rooted practice, which they did not want to abandon, come what may.

It was this stance that dictated the tone of their debate with Lot (a.s.). So they did not heed his admonitions and warnings of impending punishment, if they were not to see sense. They responded with threats to evict him and his family from their village. They challenged him to bring down the punishment he was threatening them with, if he was truthful. It was the age-old position of people who, although they can feel guilty, try to vent their anger on others, telling them to their face: This is what we do and shall not abandon. Go away and do whatever you like. Do not bother us with your talk. This had been the reaction of the adversaries of the prophets, from time immemorial, in that there seemed to be no place

for an honest and well-informed debate, apart from issuing threats and requesting the wrath to descend forthwith.

### The Divine happy ending

In some of the verses you can detect the depressed mindset Lot (a.s.) appeared to have been in, especially when the guests knocked at his door. He felt embarrassed because of the behaviour of his people in satisfying their depraved sexual desires. This was what he faced when the angels called on him, assuming a human appearance. Lot's people were waiting for this opportunity, rushing to his house and asking him to let go of his guests. In the dialogue that ensued between Lot and his people, he tried his best to make them give up his guests, yet to no avail. The showdown ended with a kind of surrender on Lot's part, since he had no power to defend himself and his family, let alone his guests. Yet he had great confidence in God's victory. Thus, he turned to Him in prayer, asking for that victory when he and his family would escape his people's harm and aggression.

God's answer came fast. Those guests of his, whom he could not protect, came with the power that would destroy the arrogance of his people and their wicked ways. Complete annihilation of his people, including his wife – who was collaborating with them and condoning their practice – was in the making. Thus, the punishment, which they were calling for, and making fun of, was fast approaching.

This is how the Holy Qur'an relates the story:

> **When Our messengers came to Lot, he was grieved on their account and felt himself powerless (to protect) them. He said: "This is a distressful day". And his people came rushing towards him, and they had been long in the habit of practising abominations. He said: "O my people! Here are my daughters: they are purer for you (if ye marry)! Now fear God, and cover me not with shame about my guests! Is there not among you a single right-minded man?" They said: "Well dost thou know we have no need of thy daughters: indeed thou knowest quite well what we want!" He said: "Would that I had power to suppress you or that I could betake myself to some powerful support". (The Messengers) said: "O Lot! We are Messengers from thy Lord! By no means shall they reach thee! Now travel with thy family while yet a part of the night remains, and let not any of you look back: but thy wife (will remain behind): To her will happen what**

**happens to the people. Morning is their time appointed: Is not the morning nigh?" When Our Decree issued, We turned (the cities) upside down, and rained down on them brimstones hard as baked clay, spread, layer on layer, Marked as from thy Lord: Nor are they ever far from those who do wrong! [11:77–83]**

## Lessons to be learned

What do we learn from this story/dialogue? This is what we will try to sum up:

### 1. Destroying the edifice of immorality

It is incumbent on the Muslim activist to discern the importance of the Islamic standpoint, i.e. putting human sexual relations on an even keel. This has come across very clearly in the Qur'anic narrative of this story, not least by reiterating this aspect several times. This has also been made manifestly clear by the punishment meted out to Lot's people, who invented this depravity.

Accordingly, we have to plan to put this aspect of Islamic legislation in a right and comprehensive framework. Islam wants man to be insulated from any form of unsavoury conduct. This being so as to put him on the right track in achieving the great goal of life that is anchored on a solid basis.

At this juncture, we may have to address the question of sex and its role in life, which has swept through human thinking. Sexual freedom has come to the fore in this day and age. The parameters put in place to practising sex, licit and illicit alike, are perceived as an affront to man's liberty. Those demands have been met with a chorus of shouts, so much so that gay and lesbian parades are now commonplace in Western countries. They call for homosexual freedom to be enshrined in legislation, so that civil laws cater for human needs. They claim that this is a natural course to solve the problems of many groups of people, who still feel constrained when it comes to fulfilling their pressing needs. Strangely enough, these campaigns succeeded in gathering momentum in some European conservative countries. The British Parliament passed a law legalizing homosexuality. This was done under the pressure of the practice becoming widespread, especially among the higher echelons of power and society. Abnormal sexual practices took another turn by condoning marriages between couples of the same sex, i.e. a man to a

man and a woman to a woman. There is even the practice of solemnizing such "wedlock" in churches, apart from laws in many countries legalizing it.

We have to face this dangerous trend with a typical Islamic approach. That is, you should not criticize any negative phenomenon outright. Rather, you must look for the real causes and the ideological justifications as well as social conditions, which gave rise to such improper conduct. By critically examining the social realities where these tendencies emerged and developed, you should be able to demolish the wrong bases and arguments on which they stand. This could be done with reference to Islamic principles and norms for building the individual and society on sound foundations, away from deviations and defects.

## 2. Rediscovering conceptions

This can be done through pondering the terminology that the Qur'an used to describe sodomy in Lot's campaign against it. If we analyse words such as lewdness, wickedness, overindulgence and monstrosity in detail and in a modern context, we should be able to prove their effectiveness in the movement of Islamic activism in life. This is so, because words can become archaic when their connotations die out by virtue of changing times and outlooks. However, the meanings may assume a new reality, should we be able to give them a new life by clothing them with new attire. We should be successful if we manage to tie in these meanings with the results brought about by abnormal sexual practices. We can then show modern man a vivid and lively picture of all the meanings that had been imparted by the Holy Qur'an to early Muslims.

If, for example, we take the words "monstrous" and "wicked", we may not be able to invite any rejection of the sexual malpractice because the reality of the sordid situation turned it into a "commendable act" after it had been an "abominable one", and "good" after it had been "bad". This is on account of its becoming an expression of man exercising his personal freedom and choice.

In this case, we need to delve deep into the words to revivify the meaning in them that would render the meanings of "monstrosity" and "wickedness" as mere superficial adjectives. We should aim to reinforce the umbilical relationship between the meaning of the words and the

malpractice, in that it has a direct effect on the interests of man, on a private as well as public level. They have a bearing on man's future and destiny. In a way, it is like a fruit that may initially taste delicious, yet it may leave a long-lasting bitter aftertaste.

Once we resolve this question, we should soon find out that man's exercising of his freedom should not be subjected to personal choices at any cost, such as his personal well-being and future. Rather, the issue is the place of that freedom in the entire movement of life and society. The individual may, in certain situations, feel the need to forgo his own personal preferences for the good of his freedom in matters of destiny. Thus, venting personal inclinations could turn into a monstrous thing because it might clash with the individual's life and future.

### 3. Abandoning nervousness

Controlling one's anxiety is the lesson we should learn from Lot's way of facing up to his people. He was blunt in explaining to them how disastrous the result of their practice of sodomy was and how adversely it would affect their capacity to pass rational judgement on things. After he had explained everything to them and how he viewed their vile deeds, he distanced himself from what they were doing and turned to his Lord. In all the verbal exchanges he had with them he was dignified, calm, and collected. He was neither tense nor did he use any inflammatory language, which might have led to injuring their feelings or sidetracking the main issue. This approach was part and parcel of the prime aim of his invitation to them to mend their ways, by convincing them of the strength of his argument and evidence. His aim was never to vent his anger at them, humiliate them, or look down his nose at them. Unfortunately, many Muslim activists, who let their personal feelings control their actions, are prone to just that. They should know full well that the task is one thing and their personal feelings is another. The two do not gel.

### 4. The promised triumph

The hope for victory should be kept alive in the heart of the activist because God gives victory to those working for His cause in many ways, regardless of how long the oppression might last. This is manifestly clear from Lot's story and how God came to his rescue at a very critical time, i.e. when he was almost on the brink of giving up.

# Shu'aib in Dialogue with his People

## Fraudsters

This is another of the stories of prophets who were sent to deal with specific types of misconduct. This time it is not a sexual but an economic one that has a bearing on people's life. Those people were cheating on others in measure and weight. This is how the Holy Qur'an speaks about them:

> **Woe to those that deal in fraud, Those who, when they have to receive by measure from men, exact full measure, but when they have to give by measure or weight to men, give less than due.** [83:1–3].

What distinguishes Shu'aib's story and his dialogue with his people from Lot's is that Shu'aib's position within his people was far stronger than Lot's. He came from a very powerful tribe. This had made his appeal to his people rather strong, yet tinged with friendliness. There was a divine air about it. He was trying to win them over to his side of the argument in an amicable way.

Shu'aib's approach won him a great following among the oppressed and disenfranchised segments of his clan. With them he faced up to the arrogant, repressive, and rich elite among his people. This could be attributed to the nature of his message and the principles he came to spread. Tampering with measurements and weights is a kind of economic exploitation that is usually perpetrated by the rich and powerful who are, by and large, driven to such practices by egotism. Thus, they resort to taking advantage in what they sell or buy fraudulently, be it in measurement or in weight. Let us experience the climate of the story of this reformist Prophet through the Qur'anic dialogue, which he conducted with the adversaries of his message:

> **To the people of Madyan We sent Shu'aib, one of their own brethren: he said: "O my people! Worship God; ye have no other god but Him. Now hath come unto you a clear (Sign) from your Lord! Give just measure and weight, nor withhold from the people the things that are their due; and do no mischief on the earth after it has been set in order: that will be best for you, if ye have Faith. And squat not on**

**every road, breathing threats, hindering from the path of God those who believe in Him, and seeking in it something crooked; but remember how ye were little, and He gave you increase. And hold in your mind's eye what was the end of those who did mischief. And if there is a party among you who believes in the message with which I have been sent, and a party which does not believe, hold yourselves in patience until God doth decide between us: for He is the best to decide".**

**The leaders, the arrogant party among his people, said: "O Shu'aib! We shall certainly drive thee out of our city – (thee) and those who believe with thee; or else ye (thou and they) shall have to return to our ways and religion". He said: "What! Even though we do detest (them)? We should indeed invent a lie against God, if we returned to your ways after God hath rescued us therefrom; nor could we by any manner of means return thereto unless it be as in the will and plan of God, Our Lord. Our Lord can reach out to the utmost recesses of things by His knowledge. In God is our trust. Our Lord! Decide Thou between us and our people in truth, for Thou art the best to decide". The leaders, the unbelievers among his people, said: "If ye follow Shu'aib, be sure then ye are ruined!"**

**But the earthquake took them unawares, and they lay prostrate in their homes before the morning! The men who rejected Shu'aib became as if they had never been in the homes where they had flourished: the men who rejected Shu'aib – it was they who were ruined! So Shu'aib left them, saying: "O my people! I did indeed convey to you the messages for which I was sent by my Lord: I gave you good counsel, but how shall I lament over a people who refuse to believe!"** [7:85–93]

We now move from this dynamic scene and stand-off to another where the style of dialogue between the prophet and the arrogant party is somewhat different, especially on the detailed aspect of the message and the challenges it faced:

**They said: "O Shu'aib! Does thy (religion of) prayer command thee that we leave off the worship which our fathers practised, or that we leave off doing what we like with our property? Truly, thou art the one that forbeareth with faults and is right- minded!" He said: "O my people! See ye whether I have a Clear (Sign) from my Lord, and He**

**hath given me sustenance (pure and) good as from Himself? I wish not, in opposition to you, to do that which I forbid you to do. I only desire (your) betterment to the best of my power; and my success (in my task) can only come from God. In Him I trust, and unto Him I look. And O my people! Let not my dissent (from you) cause you to sin, lest ye suffer a fate similar to that of the people of Noah or of Hud or of Saleh, nor are the people of Lot far off from you! But ask forgiveness of your Lord, and turn unto Him (in repentance): For my Lord is indeed full of mercy and loving-kindness".**

**They said: "O Shu'aib! Much of what thou sayest we do not understand! In fact among us we see that thou hast no strength! Were it not for thy family, we should certainly have stoned thee! For thou hast among us no great position!" He said: "O my people! Is then my family of more consideration with you than God? For ye cast Him away behind your backs (with contempt). But verily my Lord encompasseth on all sides all that ye do! And O my people! Do whatever ye can: I will do (my part): Soon will ye know who it is on whom descends the penalty of ignominy; and who is a liar! And watch ye! For I too am watching with you!"** [11:87–93]

In this dialogue, the following points become clear:

## 1. The crooked way

The issues Shu'aib (a.s.) had discussed should throw some light on his people's conduct, especially in their business dealings with others. They sought to cheat people and sow sleaze in the land. They practised all ways possible to turn away from the right path of God and intimidated others not to follow it, leading them astray.

## 2. Chauvinistic vs. ideological struggle

Shu'aib did not want to set off a struggle with his people on tribal lines, in that he kept his tribe outside the game. This would drag the struggle into self-centred issues and revive age-old enmities. He sought to rouse in them the desire to reflect on things, so that an honest and well-informed debate would ensue between the believers and unbelievers among his people, until God adjudicated in the matter, for He is the best of judges. Ideological debate is capable of yielding results for all parties, not least by finding new common ground to be shared by the antagonists.

### 3. Disrupted dialogue

Shu'aib's people were not serious in engaging in serious debate with him on the issues he raised. Instead, they were poking fun at him and his religion/prayer, which prompted him to stand up against their going astray, especially for not relinquishing the ways they inherited from their forefathers and for doing with their property what they liked. They went on to be patronizing, in that they said he could not be serious because he was a wise and right-minded man who did not behave outside social norms, or could not do what would land him in trouble. They resorted to threatening Shu'aib's followers to either abandon their new religion and go back to the fold or face expulsion.

While rejecting all forms of intimidation and blackmail, Shu'aib cautioned them against God's wrath. He reminded them of the fate of bygone peoples who chose to stand against the Messages of the prophets and how in the end they faced calamitous fate. While sparing no effort to sway the arrogant among his people from their antagonistic stance, he made it clear to them that he and his followers were not going to buckle under the pressure because their cause was not a personal one. Theirs was an issue of right and wrong, which have a bearing on both this life and the hereafter. Firm in the knowledge that they had been delivered from utter darkness that would have led to their annihilation, they were not for turning. Thus, they never contemplated any compromise whatsoever. Shu'aib was clear in his mind. That is why he did not entertain any thought of weakness or wavering. Yet, he never gave up on God's support, beseeching Him to decide between the two sides for He is the best arbiter.

### 4. The right criterion

The declaration of the unbelievers that they would have stoned him had it not been for Shu'aib's tribe, was an indication that his power base was a force to be reckoned with and that his tribe provided him with an insurance policy against the harm that would have otherwise befallen him. However, Shu'aib differed with them on that argument because he told them that they were mistaken, i.e. no matter how strong his tribe was it amounted to nothing before the might of the Almighty. He further explained that his tribe's power was limited to the resources it owned, viz. human resources, wealth, or weapons, whereas God is Omnipotent. So, it was wiser that they should fear God's might rather than Shu'aib's own

tribe. In the end, he threatened them with God's punishment, which was nigh.

The unbelievers continued their campaign to sway the believers by arguing the issue on a profit-and-loss basis. Following Shu'aib would, according to their calculations, lead to material as well as moral loss. However, after punishment had been meted out, the Holy Qur'an makes it clear to the believers that loss was the lot of the unbelievers, who were the losers in both this world and the hereafter. As for the material as well as moral gain, there is no doubt which party garnered it.

## 5. Responsible, not irresponsible, freedoms

The unbelievers' rejection of the legal provision that makes fraud illegal may be attributed to a mistaken belief, i.e. the absolute freedom of man over his property. That is, no law should encroach upon this freedom in any way. This was the main thrust of their vehement argument, **"Or that we leave off doing what we like with our property?"**

Yet, Shu'aib was faithful to the divine code, which recognizes freedom in the context of the public interest and what ensures for life its perfect equilibrium. Thus, in its drive to constrain or grant freedom, i.e. in decreeing what is permissible and what is not, the divine law seeks to make this balance prevail. Fraudulent practice, as that taken to by a group of Shu'aib's people, was a kind of wily exploitation and transgression against people's rights and a plundering of their property. This was bound to upset the equilibrium that religions have come to apply in society and people's lives, in that all parties should be given their fair share when they deal with each other. That must be so, for it is in keeping with the doctrinal preponderance that regulates responsibilities and rights between people. That is, fraudulent practices were declared illicit to prevent corruption in the land.

All this leads us to conclude decisively against the calls propagating the doctrine of free market, which advocates freedom of any commercial activity, irrespective of whether it is detrimental to man's welfare or not. It is evident that such doctrine has put in place the legal framework to protect the perpetrators of malpractices, be they political, economic, or social. Such practices are indulged into under the pretext of free trade, which is motivated primarily by profit and loss, away from any moral or humane considerations.

This is clearly manifest in modern capitalist ideology, which encourages and protects these practices under the semblance of economic freedom, which, according to its proponents, is one of the main pillars of the question of freedom in the world. This ideology has paved the way to the birth of colonialism, which enslaves peoples and exploits their natural resources, and turns them into consumer entities to buy its industrial products. It goes without saying that this malpractice would inevitably lead to perpetuating backwardness, ignorance, and superstitions. It would also lead the despotic powers to suppress harshly any inclinations to achieve political as well as economic liberation and independence.

A by-product of colonialism has been the sowing and perpetuating of religious, social, and regional differences and turning them into intractable armed conflicts, which are bound to sap the energy of those peoples and drain their resources. That, of course, is in an effort to produce and sell more arms to feed the appetites of the warring factions. This in turn is liable to make the politicians in the countries where conflicts are rife, natural clients for arms producing nations, just to keep the conflict alive and kicking whenever there was hope that these conflicts seem to be receding.

This dialogue rejects unequivocally economic freedom in its capitalist model, which is devoid of any moral or human considerations. Instead, it advocates that the wider human interests should govern financial freedom where equilibrium should rule supreme in life. Thus, its legislative principle, i.e. the wider human interest, is unvarying. That is, it is one, regardless of time and place.

At this juncture, we reckon it is imperative to remind many believers and Muslim activists, working in the cause of God, to be mindful of that delicate line that separates economic freedom, as it is expounded by capitalist ideology, from that espoused by Islam, in its legislation for private ownership and protecting it. Capitalism espouses the slogan of the people of Shu'aib, when they protested against his call not to do with their property whatever they wished on account of personal freedom. Whereas, Islam promotes the motto of Shu'aib, **"I only desire (your) betterment to the best of my power". "And do no mischief on the earth after it has been set in order".** That is, he believed in private ownership, provided that the owners did not seek with their wealth to corrupt both people and land, i.e. by squandering its resources. So, if wealth turns into

a tool of corruption, Islam moves to constrain it forcefully so that life goes on, enjoying responsible, not irresponsible, freedom.

## 6. The great importance of economics

What should be gathered from the importance that Islam attaches to the story of Shu'aib (a.s.) is that the economic dimension had a great significance in the dynamism of the prophetic missions. It is so important that it has a priority over other domains of legislation, not least because of its relationship with the question of maintaining equilibrium in life.

In this light, we deem it necessary to remind Muslim activists to lend this subject a greater share of focus in their work. They have to put great emphasis on Islamic legislative aspects in order to give the right perspective of Islamic solutions to economic problems. In concert, they have to fight deliberately shady economic activity in all its facets, because the Holy Qur'an, in the story of Shu'aib, did not denounce his people's practice of cheating in measurement or weight in itself, but rather, for its bad impact on the life of people. That is, it is a corruptive practice that could bear heavily on the weak and poor in their dependency on the rich and powerful. This should enable us to combat unlawful exploitation, monopoly, and illicit trade, which are detrimental to health, ethics, freedom, and integrity. Deceit, stealing, bribery, interest-based systems, and all practices that are geared towards corrupting political and social realities should be resisted in the same vein and measure. This stand-off should turn into an open war on monopolists, exploiters, those who dabble in usury, cheats, thieves, the merchants of politics and religion, and war and civil strife mongers. This is because all those categories of people aim to profiteer at the expense of people's lives and stability.

This stance is the one that would present to people the comprehensive system to regulate life, in all its spheres, on a solid basis. Such stand is also capable of pre-empting any move by anti-Muslim forces to succeed in neutralizing Islam. Those forces work hard to smear Islam and paint a bleak picture of it as representing some sort of utopian set of rules and regulations that have no relation to man's real life and concerns. They also seek to wage media war against the workers in the cause of Islam, in that they portray them as the natural allies of monopolistic and exploitative regimes. They further allege that those workers acquiesce to economic malpractice and its perpetrators, and that they only raise their fingers against doctrinal and moral decadence that might have a

bearing on economic misconduct.

We raise these issues so as to face them with a well-thought-out plan, which should be part and parcel of a comprehensive one for propagating Islam among the people. Obviously, this is the realistic Islamic way, which the Qur'an has affirmed in its lawgiving, conceptions, and practical progress, in that it is an extension of all prophetic divine missions.

This approach can pull us away from the narrow-minded reactive mentality that is subject in its outlook to echoing what others dictate to it. Such a mentality has given hostages to fortune because it lacks originality of thought and proactive thinking. It is unable to predict problems and work to forestall their occurrence. The greatness of any movement lies in its achievements in the theatre of life where the pluses outweigh the minuses, and profit taking is commonplace. Then, and only then, would reactions, should they take place, be outside the circle of mistakes, i.e. a way of protest by others for being unable to find faults.

This is the significance of Qur'anic lawgiving and storytelling. It raises a host of issues, only to give the opportunity to man to reflect on them objectively and calmly, which should result in walking the right path.

### 7. The decisive word

The last chapter of Shu'aib's story ends with him standing over the smithereens of his people who perished in punishment. There he stood, reminding them that he did his best to convey to them the Divine Message and that he gave them good counsel. Yet, they chose to rebel against it. Thus, he had no regrets for what had befallen them, which was due to their unbelief and intransigence. No remorse for their fate was due because they were against life that draws on the Will of God.

# Joseph's Story

## Critical situations

We encounter in the Holy Qur'an the story of Joseph (a.s.), which is eventful. He had hit rough patches from a tender age. He was the victim of a plot hatched by his brothers to get rid of him out of envy. Having survived that one, he ended up in captivity. He then had to fend of the temptation, and finally the attempted rape, by the wife of his master, which wrongfully landed him in jail for a long period. After his release, he was appointed the prime lieutenant to administer the affairs of the country. Thus, his powerful position enabled him to weather the detestable feelings of his brothers and turn them into a brotherly loving relationship, and finally his success in realizing the family reunion.

Here we are not trying to put emphasis on the development of the story, in its changing scenery. Rather, we will be trying to pause at the short dialogues in the story to see, through them, how lively, expressive, and crystal clear the pictures of the lives of the prophets had been. These are the examples the Holy Qur'an wants us to follow. We shall follow those dialogues step by step.

## Joseph and the wife of the chief minister (*al-Aziz*)

> **But she in whose house he was, sought to seduce him from his (true) self: she fastened the doors, and said: "Now come, thou (dear one)!" He said: "God forbid! Truly (thy husband) is my lord! He made my sojourn agreeable! Truly to no good come those who do wrong!" And (with passion) did she desire him, and he would have desired her, but that he saw the evidence of his Lord: thus (did We order) that We might turn away from him (all) evil and shameful deeds: for he was one of Our servants, sincere and purified. So, they both raced each other to the door, and she tore his shirt from the back: they both found her lord near the door. She said: "What is the (fitting) punishment for one who formed an evil design against thy wife, but prison or a grievous chastisement?" He said: "It was she that sought to seduce me from my (true) self". And one of her household saw (this) and bore witness, (thus) "If it be that his shirt is rent from the**

**front, then is her tale true, and he is a liar! But if it be that his shirt is torn from the back, then is she the liar, and he is telling the truth!" So, when he saw his shirt – that it was torn at the back – (her husband) said: "Behold! It is a snare of you women! Truly, mighty is your snare! O Joseph, pass this over! (O wife), ask forgiveness for thy sin, for truly thou hast been at fault!"**

**In the city, ladies said: "The wife of the Aziz (chief minister) is seeking to seduce her slave from his (true) self: Truly hath he inspired her with violent love: we see she is evidently going astray". When she heard of their malicious talk, she sent for them and prepared a banquet for them: she gave each of them a knife: and she said (to Joseph), "Come out before them". When they saw him, they did extol him, and (in their amazement) cut their hands: they said, "God preserve us! No mortal is this! This is none other than a noble angel!" She said: "There before you is the man about whom ye did blame me! I did seek to seduce him from his (true) self but he did firmly save himself guiltless! And now, if he doth not my bidding, he shall certainly be cast into prison, and (what is more) be of the company of the vilest!" He said: "O my Lord! The prison is more to my liking than that to which they invite me: Unless Thou turn away their snare from me, I should (in my youthful folly) feel inclined towards them and join the ranks of the ignorant". So his Lord hearkened to him (in his prayer), and turned away from him their snare: Verily He heareth and knoweth (all things).** [12:23–43]

This is the entire picture of his story with the wife of the chief minister. The climate was rife with temptation and everything that was conducive to leading one astray. Joseph (a.s.) was in the prime of youth when his sexual drive was in full zest. On the other hand, the wife of the chief minister was a female who was infatuated with Joseph, who was exceptionally handsome. Because of living under one roof, the climate was conducive to admiration bordering on the obsessive on the part of the woman. The situation was further aggravated by the husband's absence from home most of the time because of his high position and responsibilities in government. The woman could not suppress her sexual urge. For his part, Joseph was busy with something different. His heart was full with the light of faith and the loyalty he felt for his master.

The story, thus, did not mention any move on his side to try to seduce the woman. She made the first move and attempted to rape him, by

locking the doors and saying that she was ready **"Now come, thou (dear one)!"**. In creating the right conditions for a sexual encounter, she thought he was going to fall victim to her advances. What was his response?

In all composure, he said **"God forbid!"** followed by the words of loyalty **"Truly (thy husband) is my lord! He made my sojourn agreeable!"** He went on to summarize the whole situation, thus, **"Truly to no good come those who do wrong!"** She was doing herself injustice by committing that sin. At the same time, she was doing her husband injustice by betraying him. As for Joseph, he would never have forgiven himself if he had reciprocated; the guilt would have haunted his conscience forever, not least for doing disservice to himself and proving ungrateful to his master who gave him shelter and took him under his wing. She did not yield to Joseph's unreserved rejection to her manifest invitation to have sex with him, in the belief that he was showing timid restraint or he was afraid of the consequences of his deed, had he gone ahead with it. She was adamant, indulging in aggressive tempting behaviour to weaken his resolve. He might have grown receptive to her incessant demand as might be gleaned from the phrase **"and he would have desired her"**. However, it was a momentary distraction that was instigated by the echo of temptation. Nevertheless, no sooner had he regained his composure by the call of faith inside him, he would have returned to defend himself against her determined sexual assault, thus: **"But that he saw the evidence of his Lord: thus (did We order) that We might turn away from him (all) evil and shameful deeds"**. That was a great testimonial to the high standard of belief attained by Joseph at that phase in his life. This would lead us to conclude that what we described as momentary distraction did not amount to more than that. It remained within the domain of feelings and emotions, in that it did not translate into action. This was through strong self-discipline.

Joseph had no option but to flee with his religion, belief, and morality. Yet, she did not let go of him, chasing him to the door and ripping his shirt. However, both were in for a surprise, as her husband was at the door. She feigned to have been the victim, accusing Joseph of attempting to rape her and suggesting the kind of punishment he should receive for "his vile deed". Nevertheless, Joseph's blamelessness was manifest in his cracking voice, the purity of his soul and in the general state he was in, so much so that her husband was sure that he was whiter than white. Yet, he

did not take any action against his wife, preferring to censure her attempt and considering it a woman's guile. Thus, he asked her to pray for forgiveness for her great sin and transgression.

The city was awash with gossip and rumour about what happened. To counter that, she invited a number of women to her house and asked Joseph to join them. They were taken aback by Joseph's angelic beauty, concluding that she was excused for what she had done and they were apologetic, to the extent that they might have entertained the thought of seducing him. There and then, she said she was not sorry for what she did and that she would keep trying until he fell to her advances. Maybe, there were other attempts by her after that womanly conference. Joseph (a.s.) started to feel the pressure and turned to invoke the power of prayer, seeking help with his Creator **"O my Lord! The prison is more to my liking than that to which they invite me"**. Thus, faith was still living vibrantly inside him, urging him to withstand the temptations. He was inclined to go to prison rather than fall prey to the sexual advances, and turned to God in humility and supplication **"Unless Thou turn away their snare from me, I should (in my youthful folly) feel inclined towards them and join the ranks of the ignorant"**.

That was a sign that he had reached the limits of forbearance and resilience. God answered his prayer by rescuing him from the women's ensnarement. He ended up in prison after the wife of the chief minister had used every weapon in her armoury to entrap him. Faith had scored a victory over misguidance, morality over immorality. The prophet emerged from the experience unscathed, scoring a victory over others and himself [his desires]. He had the best of both worlds, a battle-hardened individual with a sublime standard of integrity. He would then face people with his practical experience as well as his ideological acumen, only to prove to them that resisting temptation was not alien to his strong character. Rather, it was an expression of a real situation the prophet faced, which he turned to his advantage. Likewise, people can face the same situation and emerge triumphant, drawing on the strength of faith in God.

The most salient scene in this dialogue is that of the believer being subjected to constant inner struggle, and trying to resist going astray under the enticement of sexual longing. In eloquent response, he prefers to stick with his belief regardless of the sacrifices and sufferings.

The dialogue between Joseph and the wife of chief minister was condensed. And yet it has captured the whole situation of a flagrant sexual attack on her part and an unmistakable rejection on his. However, given the twists and turns of the story, you might notice that there are underlying long dialogues between both the chief characters of the story, not least by her failed attempts to entice Joseph to have sex with her, including the all-women party she gave in her palace. Perhaps this should indicate that there might have been a long talk by those women to persuade him to give in to her sexual advances. This is borne out by the fact that he turned to his Lord in prayer to save him from the guile of all the women.

In the discourse related by the Qur'anic verse, you come across a living example of the unwavering position of belief versus temptation. This is so as to explain that the call to observe chastity in sexual relations is not a far-fetched idea. It is a reality as has already been manifested in Joseph's case. His position remained constant throughout the entire unpleasant experience.

The story is also trying to tell us that man must remain faithful to his original word and position, if it emanates from a deep sense of conviction. Thus, it would remain much stronger than all adverse words and situations.

## Joseph in prison

**Then it occurred to the men, after they had seen the signs, (that it was best) to imprison him for a time. Now with him there came into the prison two young men. Said one of them: "I see myself (in a dream) pressing wine". Said the other: "I see myself (in a dream) carrying bread on my head, and birds are eating, thereof". "Tell us" (they said) "the truth and meaning thereof: for we see thou art one that doth good (to all)".**

**He said: "Before any food comes (in due course) to feed either of you, I will surely reveal to you the truth and meaning of this ere it befall you: that is part of the (duty) which my Lord hath taught me. I have (I assure you) abandoned the ways of a people that believe not in God and that (even) deny the Hereafter. And I follow the ways of my fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and never could we attribute any partners whatever to God: that (comes) of the grace of God to us and to mankind: yet most men are not grateful. O my two companions of**

**the prison! (I ask you): are many lords differing among themselves better, or the One God, Supreme and Irresistible? If not Him, ye worship nothing but names which ye have named – ye and your fathers – for which God hath sent down no authority: the command is for none but God: He hath commanded that ye worship none but Him: that is the right religion, but most men understand not. O my two companions of the prison! As to one of you, he will pour out the wine for his lord to drink: as for the other, he will hang from the cross, and the birds will eat from off his head. (So) hath been decreed that matter whereof ye twain do enquire".**

**And of the two, to that one whom he considers about to be saved, he said: "Mention me to thy lord". But Satan made him forget to mention him to his lord: and (Joseph) lingered in prison a few (more) years.** [12:35–42]

This dialogue discusses a crucial matter in the domain of calling to the way of God. It is that Muslim activists should not make imprisonment, if they ever experience it, a prelude to surrendering to their personal predicament. They should not overindulge in looking forward to freedom at the expense of their noble task, i.e. that of serving the Message, to the extent that they might risk becoming far removed from it. Rather, they should turn the prison into a hive of industry in the cause of God. Prisons could be fertile grounds for sowing the seeds of good thought because of the nature of the environment. Such surroundings are conducive to bringing inmates closer to spiritual tranquillity, and pulling them away from all materialistic and social influences, which in turn can make them feel the proximity of God and His Omnipotence. On the other hand, a prison environment can make the inmates more receptive to dialogue and lend a listening ear to what is said because they feel the need to escape mentally from the situation they are in and spend more time on new things that are capable of filling their time.

This is evident from the prison chapter of Joseph's story. He listened to his prison mates speaking about the dreams they saw in their sleep and asking for interpretations. He entertained their request, seizing the opportunity to resume his work from within the prison walls in calling to the way of God. At the outset, he put them at ease, promising them that he was very well versed in interpreting dreams in order to finally win them over to the belief in the One and Only God.

He started the conversation by speaking about himself and his faith, which had come as a result of deep-rooted conviction based on strong evidence. He then attacked the misguided thoughts that were based on worshipping gods other than God, or setting up partners to Him. He made it clear to them that that type of worship did not make sense and had no logical basis. However, he did not hide his desire to come out of prison, asking the inmate, whom he thought was going to be released and reinstated in his job, to mention his name during his audience with the king. Nevertheless, his companion forgot to do so, leaving Joseph languishing in prison several more years. This is the tale of a divinely guided prophet who lived every moment of his life thinking of his noble task, with scant regard for his personal matters.

In this day and age, we have witnessed the importance of prison environments, in that they offer the opportunity for spreading the Message and engaging in dialogue. This state of affairs has led many organizations and political parties to send some of their elements to prisons to propagate their doctrines among the inmates.

### Joseph, a free man

We are given more morals and lessons in the final chapters of Joseph's story. However, we are not going to dwell on those chapters here. We will, however, conclude our discussion by bringing to the fore the dialogue between Joseph and the king, when Joseph was summoned by the king to be informed of his appointment as secretary to the treasury, in order to handle the impending economic crisis the country would go through, according to Joseph's reading of the king's dream. Joseph made his acceptance of the post conditional on clearing his name of the charge of attempting to rape the wife of the chief minister, by insisting on calling the women – whom the wife of the chief minister had invited and confessed in their presence that she was after Joseph (a.s.) – to give evidence and exonerate him:

> **The king (of Egypt) said: "I do see (in a vision) seven fat kine [cows], whom seven lean ones devour, and seven green ears of corn, and seven (others) withered. O ye chiefs! Expound to me my vision if it be that ye can interpret visions". They said: "A confused medley of dreams: and we are not skilled in the interpretation of dreams". But the man who had been released, one of the two (who had been in prison) and who now bethought him after (so long) a space of time, said: "I will**

**tell you the truth of its interpretation: send ye me (therefore)". "O Joseph!" (He said) "O man of truth! Expound to us (the dream) of seven fat kine whom seven lean ones devour, and of seven green ears of corn and (seven) others withered: that I may return to the people, and that they may understand". (Joseph) said: "For seven years shall ye diligently sow as is your wont: and the harvests that ye reap, ye shall leave them in the ear – except a little, of which ye shall eat. Then will come after that (period) seven dreadful (years), which will devour what ye shall have laid by in advance for them – (all) except a little which ye shall have (specially) guarded. Then will come after that (period) a year in which the people will have abundant water, and in which they will press (wine and oil)".**

**So the king said: "Bring ye him unto me". But when the messenger came to him, (Joseph) said: "Go thou back to thy lord, and ask him, 'What is the state of mind of the ladies who cut their hands'? For my Lord is certainly well aware of their snare". (The king) said (to the ladies): "What was your affair when ye did seek to seduce Joseph from his (true) self?" The ladies said: "God preserve us! No evil know we against him!" Said the Aziz's wife: "Now is the truth manifest (to all): it was I who sought to seduce him from his (true) self: He is indeed of those who are (ever) true (and virtuous)". "This (say I), in order that He may know that I have never been false to him in his absence, and that God will never guide the snare of the false ones. Nor do I absolve my own self (of blame): the (human) soul is certainly prone to evil, unless my Lord do bestow His Mercy: but surely my Lord is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful". [12:43-53].**

From this dialogue, we can learn the following:

## 1. Shouldering responsibility calls for a clean record

In order to accept the appointment, Joseph had no choice but to demand the clearance of his name from the unproven charges that landed him in prison. According to him, this was a prerequisite because his office meant that he had to regain public confidence. He looked at the affair from a public, rather than a personal, perspective. To his mind, the public office he was going hold would necessitate that he should clear his name. Failure to do so would constitute a hindrance to his message reaching a wider audience.

By sticking to his guns and the strength of his position, Joseph

succeeded in forcing the culprits to publicly confess that they lied. Then, and only then, he accepted the appointment with confidence and peace of mind. Here is a lesson for Muslim activists to be drawn from Joseph's uncompromising stand. They should abide by the strength of their conviction and case. It is very important that they discuss the charges made against them and defend themselves where possible, leaving that which could not be clarified fully to some other opportune time. This has a bearing on the interests of the noble task they are entrusted with. The activists should not be in a position to say: We do not need to protest our innocence as long as we know for sure that we are innocent and God Almighty is aware that we are truthful in submitting to Him and earning His pleasure. There is no way they can do that because personal satisfaction that one is wrongfully accused should not be a licence to keep quiet and not contest the charges, so long as they can do so. They should go about this by making their mind up that it is not a personal matter. Rather, it is a public right. It is within everyone's right to be in the right position to discuss all issues, with a view to arriving at satisfactory and clear conclusions. Such conclusions would then be turned into added force to boost the movement and its activists.

## 2. The activists between acquiring knowledge and taking part in power

We should be able to understand from Joseph's story, especially his dialogue while he was in prison and after his release, one of life's fundamental realities. That is, it is incumbent on the workers in the way of God to pursue the acquisition of knowledge, to better the chances of their own advancement, which would, in turn, gives good returns to society. In so doing, they would be better positioned to influence the masses.

This, however, may lead to taking part in running the affairs of the nation (*ummah*), which would in the end serve to achieve the objective.

It goes without saying that should this happen, they must be absolutely sure that they are going to maintain their integrity and religion from falling prey to the lure and trappings of power. In the final analysis, what should matter is one's noble task in life, which should be discharged with self-denial. So, should they be not so sure about resisting the temptations of power and keeping on the straight path, they should stay put and do their level best without much ado.

This is the reality of Joseph's story. His expertise in interpreting dreams opened the door wide for him to win his two prison mates over to his cause and eventually secure his own release from prison. His knowledge earned him the king's confidence and paved the way for him to occupy one of the highest echelons of power, the captain of the economy. This had stood him in good stead in the field of calling to the way of God and steering the economy towards serving social justice that God and His messenger are pleased to see done.

### 3. Miracles top the list of knowledge

In the nature of the miracles performed by the prophets, there is a manifestation that they come at the top of any field of knowledge or skill prevailing at their time. This would make people grow in confidence and identify with the prophet for seeing him far more knowledgeable than them. At the time of Prophet Moses (a.s.) sorcery was widespread. His staff, which turned into a serpent devouring all the trickery the magicians had shown, came at the top of that craft. The act was so sublime that it was outside the reach of witchcraft, to the extent that the magicians had no choice but to prostrate themselves to God and become believers in His message without waiting for permission from Pharaoh. In the case of Prophet Jesus (a.s.), medicine was the number one discipline. God sent him with the miracle of raising the dead, giving back the blessing of sight to the blind, and curing lepers. Those were feats, which made him win the people's hearts and minds, so much so that a section of them went astray into believing that he was a divine. Literary excellence and linguistic elocution were the prime virtues of the Arab society at the time of Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.). The Holy Qur'an was his miracle, as it challenged all men of letters and eloquent speakers into imitating its style, and yet they could not.

All this gives us a clear idea about the place of knowledge and the role well-informed activists could play in the service of their mission on the way of God. It is capable of earning them the respect of people and defeating the challenges of unbelievers and hypocrites.

### 4. Evangelism exploits knowledge to serve its design

The missionary movement and colonial powers planned very well and got prepared for spreading the Gospel. Many of their activists majored in many disciplines and fields of knowledge, which would eventually open

the doors of universities, hospitals, international conferences, etc. for them. This has made their entry into society through its widest doors a foregone conclusion. Consequently, they have had great influence, if not a stranglehold over the culture, well-being and system of society. On another level, the European orientalist movement was made subservient to the aims of the missionary movement, which was bent on sullying the image of Islam, its Prophet and all that it stands for in culture, and finally drove it out from the lives of people. We have experienced first hand the designs of imperialistic organizations, which seek to have an impact on society by sending much-needed people with the required know-how. This is bound to make them pull strings in people's lives.

## 5. The sublime position of Joseph towards his brothers

At the end of this remarkable story, we come face to face with yet another noble position taken by Joseph. This time, it is his magnanimous position on his brothers, who confessed their crime in plotting to kill or get rid of him out of envy. His faith in God and his steadfastness in adversity, which led him eventually to rule supreme, made him forgive and be kind to them without their knowledge. Once they came to know about it, that gracious position made them apologize to him for their wrongdoings. For his part, he pardoned them without overbearing, thus:

> **They said: 'By God! Indeed has God preferred thee above us, and we certainly have been guilty of sin!' He said: 'This day let no reproach be (cast) on you: God will forgive you, and He is the Most Merciful of those who show mercy!'.** [12:91–92].

Here, we see Joseph again in a situation where he expresses his submission before God, when he was reunited with his parents and elevated them to the throne. He did not talk about his story in detail, apart from the fact that he concluded that it was, in all its phases, a grace from Him. He was self-effacing before his parents and brothers, whom he did not reproach for their transgression against him because, to his mind, their problem was that of Satan's instigation. For their part, once they discovered that they had been in the wrong, they returned to the right path where God is.

In the end, Joseph (a.s.) turned in prayer to God to make Him bear witness to his real feelings about all the trials, tribulations, and successes he went through, of asking for His support and protection:

**And he raised his parents high on the throne (of dignity), and they fell down in prostration, (all) before him. He said: "O my father! This is the fulfilment of my vision of old! God hath made it come true! He was indeed good to me when He took me out of prison and brought you (all here) out of the desert, (even) after Satan had sown enmity between me and my brothers. Verily my Lord understandeth best the mysteries of all that He planneth to do, for verily He is full of knowledge and wisdom. O my Lord! Thou hast indeed bestowed on me some power, and taught me something of the interpretation of dreams and events – O Thou Creator of the heavens and the earth! Thou art my Protector in this world and in the Hereafter. Take Thou my soul (at death) as one submitting to Thy will (as a Muslim), and unite me with the righteous". [12:100–01]**

## The ultimate lesson

In Joseph's story there are many lessons for the workers in the way of God to draw. They should follow in his footsteps when they progress from small positions and make great leaps, after experiencing thick and thin and utilizing all their energy in the arena of struggle. They should, when their time comes in reaching the summit, not be like peacocks prone to showing off. They should not be like those who cannot resist the trappings of power and fall to its temptations, forgetting in the process their duty towards their Lord, and doing themselves injustice. They may also turn all the divine triumphs into ones that have been achieved by their personal efforts *per se*.

And yet, there are others, who are among the very few, who stand tall to assert that the procession of the divine messages should take precedence over life's aspirations and that divine successes are not the exclusive preserve of the individual. They are divine graces that God bestows on the workers in His way, endowing them with talent and competence to be used in spreading the Message. Thus, there should be no place for conceit or looking down on people. Rather, there is only a place for humility based on man's faith in his Lord and his feeling of dependency on Him in everything, and that there is neither power nor refuge except with God, the Most High, the Omnipotent.

This story is a practical lesson that the workers in the way of God should learn, so that they follow in the footsteps of the prophets who felt a sense of humility before victories and prayed to Him for any glimmer of

success or progress. You should also invoke the power of prayer in adversity because His is the final word. So, in success or in failure, you have to turn to Him.

A great part of Joseph's story discusses the emotional side of the human soul. Here we would like to dwell on this subject by raising two mind-provoking thoughts, which we can deduce from the way the Qur'an has told the story:

### 1. Religion does not disapprove of passions

Religion has not declared the subject of discussing emotional matters taboo. People should feel free to talk about this subject, including love stories, provided that they serve the intents and purposes of the Message. These stories would in the end depict a position where man's will triumphs over the human feelings and sexual drive. Thus, the person who emerges gaining the upper hand over his desires would represent the true person who is entwined with God's Message. Such a person would serve as a paradigm to Islam's realism in its laws and doctrines. The stories may depict some tragic episodes for men and women who had followed the crooked way in satisfying their sexual needs. Such stories should serve as a deterrent to others as not to tread the same path. This should help to start planning for responsible Islamic literature, in which there can be a love story beside social, political, and other matters.

In so doing, the Islamic approach to calling to the way of God would open a window of opportunity through which Islam's law and ideology shine on people's lives. This is with the aim of making it abundantly clear that Islam is not confined to certain aspects of life. It is there to permeate those domains of man's life that relate to feelings and emotions too. This would render false the notion that Islam would not have anything to do with these sentimental issues. There is no way that this can be true after the Holy Qur'an and Scripture have talked about these issues in many places.

However, artistic guidelines have to be put in place, with a view to putting this literary activity on an even keel, within the main Islamic framework for ideology and calling to the way of God, as is the case with other literary trends.

### 2. Religion and sexual education

Religion talks about sexual relations, both normal and abnormal ones, in a natural manner, precisely as is the case with any other human

relationships. This is indicative of the fact that knowledge about that aspect of human relationships is not a demeaning one, as social customs seem to suggest. On the contrary, Islam does not stand in the way of spreading sexual education within a sound plan, away from the climate of sexual arousal, like any other domain of education. This is particularly so, when it is evident that many Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions call a spade a spade.

We can go further to say that Islam encourages such education, not least because many legal injunctions relate to sexual relationships between men and women. Examples of this are ritual bathing (*ghusl*) after sexual intercourse, restoring physical purity to the body after a monthly period or childbirth, etc. Upholding these commands and fulfilling such duties satisfactorily would not be achieved unless one knew in detail the functions of male and female reproduction organs/systems. The adage has it, *"There is no place for shyness in religious matters"*.

In this light, we can say that Islam is in favour of the call for sexual education, not from the perspective that maintains that ignorance would engender psychological complexes but rather, from a standpoint that rejects the mentality that considers dabbling in sexual matters a shameless behaviour or a taboo. Furthermore, sexual education has a bearing on practising certain acts of worship or stopping short of embarking on others. This would render sexual education a sacred religious duty. In a nutshell, we aspire to spread sexual education through the Qur'anic stories and Islamic lawgiving, besides the solid building of the Islamic character, away from all inferiority complexes and negative influences.

It is quite natural, therefore, that we put a lot of effort into studying the Book and the prophetic traditions, so that we can arrive at Islam's comprehensive view on the sexual question. This is because it is considered one of the central issues that occupy a big part in social and educational thinking these days. This would be in response to a fundamental stance that makes it incumbent on us to exert the effort in deducing Islam's position on any issue that comes to the fore and every trend that imposes itself on life, lest Muslims should remain at a loss in the midst of conflicting opinions.

# *Chapter VII*

# Qur'anic Storytelling in Dialogue (2)

## Humans in Dialogue on the Divine Message

In the previous chapters of this book the discussion was focused on the prophets and their dialogues on the Message they were sent to deliver. Certainly, there have been lessons to learn in how best to conduct Islamic activism now and in the future.

The discussion in this chapter will be centred on different kinds of people who were the subject matter of many and varied instances where humans were involved in a dialogue of some sort or the other as is told by the Holy Qur'an. From these historical incidences there are good things to be followed or surpassed as well as bad examples to avoid.

The Holy Qur'an has portrayed many examples of both camps, i.e. of belief and unbelief. There were people who remained faithful to their ideological conviction, on the right path, while others went astray both in thought and practice. As for the good examples, the Qur'an has tried to make clear what has set them apart, some so much so that they transcend all barriers of time, place, and peoples to shine in our lives.

Here, we are attempting to study the Qur'anic stories of those people, be they good, so that we may follow their example, or bad, so that we may keep our distance from them.

# Abel and Cain

One of the most striking techniques of dialogue of the Holy Qur'an has been the use of two contradictory characters, one worthy of emulating and the other unworthy of following. Over a particular incident the two people take diametrically opposed positions, where the vocal dialogue starts word for word and the silent one with action and counteraction. This paves the way for both parties to the dialogue to speak their minds. The verbal exchanges and trading of actions would then give man the whole picture in order to go about his life treading the right path.

An example of this type of dialogue is in the story of Abel and Cain, which the Qur'an has related in a terse manner, thus:

> **Recite to them the truth of the story of the two sons of Adam. Behold! They each presented a sacrifice (to God): It was accepted from one, but not from the other. Said the latter: "Be sure I will slay thee". "Surely," said the former, "God doth accept of the sacrifice of those who are righteous. If thou dost stretch thy hand against me, to slay me, it is not for me to stretch my hand against thee to slay thee: for I do fear God, the Cherisher of the Worlds. For me, I intend to let thee draw on thyself my sin as well as thine, for thou wilt be among the companions of the fire, and that is the reward of those who do wrong". The (selfish) soul of the other led him to the murder of his brother: he murdered him, and became (himself) one of the lost ones.** [5:27–28]

## Comparing the two men

Assuming we are watching the events of this story unfold before our eyes, scene one of the play is enacted where the two sons of Adam are seen offering sacrifices to God, just to seek His pleasure or ask for a favour to be bestowed on them. The result was that He accepted the sacrificial offering of one of them and turned down the other. The beaten party did not concede defeat with obedience. On the contrary, he protested and rebelled, contemplating transgression.

Scene two takes us to the argument between the two brothers, where the loser started threatening the one with the firm religious faith whose offering God had accepted. He was seething with anger, animosity, and envy, so much so that he threatened his brother with death. There was no need to issue death threats and retribution, as the threatened party had no hand in the result of the competition. It was all God's making. Thus, He should have been the one who would have addressed any grievance. However, this had come about as a result of blind envy.

What was the reaction of the believer? All that one can learn of the position of the brother who had been threatened with death was indicative of the calmness and tranquillity of belief and spiritual purity, which can be detected from the true feelings for the misguided brother. His words encapsulated such sincere feelings, especially in his response to his brother:

> **If thou dost stretch thy hand against me, to slay me, it is not for me to stretch my hand against thee to slay thee: for I do fear God, the Cherisher of the Worlds.** [5:28].

It is the position of non-violence and a propensity for peacemaking. He raised himself above the threatening language used by his brother, as he did not subscribe to the attitude of homicide in a moment of fury or caprice. He believed in calm and reasoned argument, which is capable of ameliorating tense situations that have been precipitated by malaise. The wiser of the two brothers then ascribed his position of non-aggression to his belief in God, who wants man to live in peace in this world. Thus he was resigned to the fact that he feared God, the Lord of the Worlds, who is aware of all words and deeds and who would call him to book for what he had done.

Firm in the knowledge that as far as he was concerned, it was a matter of principle, the more sensible of them cautioned the other brother that he would be held responsible for the guilt of both the killer and the victim, should he decide to go ahead and kill him. He further warned him that his final abode would be hellfire, which is the punishment of transgressors. This initiative of reminding the would-be killer for an impending punishment has an echo in this tradition, ***"The killer would cause the cleansing of all sins of his victim"*** if the killing was unprovoked. This is intended to serve as a deterrent not to commit murder and a reminder of the consequences, if it is committed.

Some people may argue that the victim was not trying to defend himself, which was within his natural right. However, the issue is not as it has been perceived. It seems that the dialogue in progress was about the use of violence to combat disappointment and runaway feelings, since it was not justified in such a case. The Qur'anic verses do not go into detail about the incident. Did the victim capitulate to the killer? Or did he put up a struggle and try to defend himself? Or did the murder take place in no time like an assassination? The verse has chosen to ignore all those details, preferring to concentrate on the vibrancy of the topic of dialogue. It did not want to drift away from the main thrust of the debate, i.e. the nature of the incident, which represented the first evil deed on earth. On the other hand, it wanted to show us the naivety of the wicked criminal and his ignorance of how to conceal his crime or bury the victim, so much so that God sent a raven to show him how to bury his dead brother. This waiting time, after he committed the crime, gave him a breathing space to reflect upon what he had done, ending in his showing remorse.

Others may also argue about the comparison between the two positions of the antagonists, concluding that, in keeping quiet, the victim had given the initiative to his brother to kill him without mounting a serious attempt to defend himself. However, our reading of the verses leads us to conclude that the victim tried to argue with his brother by first rejecting the idea of his starting the aggression on the basis of the justifications given by the aggressor. Thus, he started with rejecting, for fear of God, the notion of being the party who would deal the first blow, which suggests that he was not in the position of self-defence that gives everyone in a similar situation the right to do so. Had he wanted the opposite, viz. showing weakness and capitulation, he would have trodden a different path.

## Educational values

The moral of this short story/dialogue, which depicted two disparate characters, representing good and evil, is that we have to warm to the notion of good and give the idea of evil the cold shoulder. Weighing the two contradictory positions against one another should tell us which side we should be on, in that the crime was unprovoked; it was perpetrated due to a psychological complex brought about by envy. The victim did not do anything that could warrant the crime against him. The victim did not even try to make a show of his triumph over his brother, when God

accepted his sacrificial offering, so that it could have been perceived as a sign of provocation. His moral fibre did not allow him to do that.

The ultimate lesson to be learned of this story is the abhorrence it engenders in the hearts and minds of people against crime and criminals. On the other side of the spectrum, it generates sympathy with the victim. This would leave an impact on human conduct in general of the deeds man may contemplate and the judgement he may wish to pass on the actions of others.

As for us, we may make use of the story in two areas:

1. In the educational field, the story may serve as a learning exercise/ experience, especially when it is turned into a play. It may be desirable to make it into a religious educational story that could target children and youths, in a way that is appropriate to their mentality, be it in an aided storytelling style, video, or a theatrical performance.

2. Writing other stories using the same theme, with a view to addressing crime, in all its types, i.e. murder, stealing, adultery, transgressing against people, etc. This is because the Qur'anic way of education starts with the planning phase, using the examples provided either by mimicking them, using the general themes, or writing original stories. It is to be stressed, though, that the Qur'anic approach has never been intended to provide the texts simply to be memorized in a barren parrot-like manner, which is in no way capable of moving forward into providing variety.

In so doing, we can ensure that Islamic educational work lives the climate of the Holy Qur'an and draws on its ideology and methods of work.

## Saul and Goliath

This is another of the prophets' stories. It revolves around a prophet who was sent to the Israelites. Knowing the name of that prophet is not so important, as we have set out to concentrate on the subject of the dialogue that took place between him and the people he was sent to.

### The story in a nutshell

The people approached their prophet to send them a king [commander] to fight in the cause of God, so that they could fight under his command, giving the impression that they were among God's army and that they were looking for a competent commander.

The prophet was somewhat sceptical of the seriousness of their request. Thus he said to them that he was fearful that they might not respond to the call to arms, if God had made it incumbent on them to fight. In reply, they made it clear that they had resolved the matter and that they were all for waging war, not least because injustice was being done to them by being ousted from their kith and kin. This, they added, would make war a just one, i.e. in defence of their interests and for preserving their faith.

The prophet appointed the commander, making it abundantly clear to them that the appointment was divinely sanctioned. However, they did not conceal their real feelings about the appointed commander, as, to their minds, he was not the right man for the job, not least for his weak financial position. That is, they considered sound economic muscle a prerequisite to command and rule. They further argued that some of them were more eligible than the appointee because they could fulfil that condition.

For his part, the prophet took issue with them that wealth should not amount to much in the qualities of the commander because the nature of his job required the availability of a fighting force and the expertise to plan and mount attacks. He confirmed that both were present in the appointee, who had been endowed with outstanding physical strength and military know-how. And, in the final analysis, it was the divine will that had decreed his appointment.

The new commander set forth with his soldiers. Testing times between the commander and his soldiers started in earnest. He announced to them that God had decided to put them through their paces to see how obedient they were in carrying out the orders issued to them. The test was that, once they got to a river, they should not drink more than a handful of water each, irrespective of how thirsty they might have been. The majority failed the test and showed flagging morale. The true believers stood their ground and eventually won the battle.

This has been the story. What lessons should we derive from it?

## Lessons for the activists

There are several points in this story/dialogue to be pondered:

### 1. The required level of preparedness

The workers in the way of God should be wary of many overzealous people who wave the slogans of jihad and yet, once a good and wise leadership becomes available, deep down they think or hope that such leadership would never emerge. We have to make use of the approach demonstrated in this story to deal with them, with a view to putting them to the test. In so doing, we should be able to find out whether they are serious. Thus, we should neutralize the deceitful elements among them, by making them face the music, if not in real situations, then at least by engaging them in dialogue that is capable of uncovering those aspects relating to the personal as well as the doctrinal.

### 2. Victory and defeat

The question of victory or defeat is not linked to large or small numbers of fighters. Rather, it is a matter of conviction, planning, organization, and armament. This is bound to make the organized forces of belief, although outnumbered, gain the ascendancy over the adversary, regardless of their numbers. This has been borne out by the fact of this sincere motto:

> **How oft, by God's will, hath a small force vanquished a big one? [2:249].**

This is bound to make the activists grow in confidence, regardless of the power the adversaries might muster.

### 3. Living the experience

The significance of the dialogue in this story is that we have been able to go through the emotions of both the groups and the positions they moved to, be they those of the waverers or the truthful. This would have seldom come across, had the style of telling the story been that of reporting, i.e. not a dialogue one. The impact of the story is far greater when it is told in a dialogue style that we can easily identify with.

### 4. Counting on God's support

Through thick and thin, the *mujahideen* among the believers should never forget that they are in need of God's support and guidance. If it is a victory they are aspiring to or forbearance in adversity, they should always count on Him. They should never lose sight of the fact that He is the granter of victory. So, going through the sentiments that one is invincible should not lead to vanity and turning one's back to God. By the same token, feelings of weakness should not lead to resignation before the Might of the Almighty. In the final analysis, be it in peace or in war, people should feel as light as a feather before the Creator as they are mere mortals.

This is the difference between the believers who feel in high feather, i.e. drawing on the strength of the Almighty, and that they shall overcome and the unbelievers who draw on earthly strength, which is waning. Thus, the latter give hostages to fortune.

After this resume, it is time to experience the story once more through this Qur'anic lively dialogue:

> **Hast thou not turned thy vision to the Chiefs of the Children of Israel after (the time of) Moses? They said to a prophet (That was) among them: "Appoint for us a King, that we May fight in the cause of God". He said: "Is it not possible, if ye were commanded to fight, that that ye will not fight?" They said: "How could we refuse to fight in the cause of God, seeing that we were turned out of our homes and our families?" But when they were commanded to fight, they turned back, except a small band among them. But God has full knowledge of those who do wrong.**
>
> **Their Prophet said to them: "God hath appointed Saul king over you". They said: "How can he exercise authority over us when we are better fitted than he to exercise authority, and he is not even gifted,**

with wealth in abundance?" He said: "God hath Chosen him above you, and hath gifted him abundantly with knowledge and bodily prowess: God Granteth His authority to whom He pleaseth. Allah is All-Embracing, and He knoweth all things".

And (further) their Prophet said to them: "A Sign of his authority is that there shall come to you the Ark of the Covenant, with (an assurance) therein of security from your Lord, and the relics left by the family of Moses and the family of Aaron, carried by angels. In this is a Symbol for you if ye indeed have faith". When Saul set forth with the armies, he said: "God will test you at the stream: if any drinks of its water, he goes not with my army: Only those who taste not of it go with me: A mere sip out of the hand is excused". but they all drank of it, except a few.

When they crossed the river, he and the faithful ones with him, they said: "This day we cannot cope with Goliath and his forces". But those who were convinced that they must meet God, said: "How oft, by God's will, hath a small force vanquished a big one? God is with those who steadfastly persevere". When they advanced to meet Goliath and his forces, they prayed: "Our Lord! Pour out constancy on us and make our steps firm: Help us against those that reject faith". By God's will they routed them; and David slew Goliath; and God gave him power and wisdom and taught him whatever (else) He willed. And did not God check one set of people by means of another, the earth would indeed be full of mischief: But God is full of bounty to all the Worlds. [2:246–51]

## Korah's Story

This is another example of the Qur'anic stories told in a dialogue manner. It is that of Korah, of the people of Moses (a.s.), who engaged his people in dialogue. For their part, they conducted a dialogue among themselves about him. Korah was the epitome of arrogance induced by wealth, so much so that his affluence led him to believe that he was invincible, and in the process, he forgot about his Lord and did injustice to himself. To Korah, wealth making was paramount, to the extent that it overwhelmed him, leaving no room for him to either think straight or do good. His vision was so narrow that he could not think of anything else other than how to get richer.

His is an example of the human materialistic mentality at both an individual level and at the level of society, a society that was head over heels in love with wealth, considering it a great human virtue.

Through Korah's dialogue with his people, the Holy Qur'an has depicted the true character of the man and the whole philosophy in life that he stood for. On the other side of the scale is another picture, that of a small group among his people who did not see anything through the same eyes. A group of people who did not show the same zeal for wealth making as Korah. They did not feel weak before the overwhelming fortune of Korah. They went further in warning him against over-indulgence in his ways and that he was better advised to put his wealth to a better use, in that the role of wealth in life was a means of using it for good, as well as living a decent life. Thus, he should have been instrumental, with all the huge wealth he had, in steering life on the right path, precisely as God has ordained, not in the service of evil aims. He should not have deemed wealth to be an idol to be worshipped.

Parallel to this stand-off between Korah and the believers among his people, the Holy Qur'an portrays another situation, that of Korah and the morally bankrupt and self-defeating groups among his people. Those people had become slaves to the facäde of wealth, so much so that they succombed to the antics of the rich and powerful. The latter used to crush the needy and make them yearn for their high standard of living and show weakness before the attraction of wealth. The believers among

Korah's people had had another honourable stand-off with the morally weak among their people by making them see sense and not fall to the temptation of wealth.

The dialogue drew to an end and the curtain was drawn on the last scene of Korah being swallowed by the earth alongside his wealth, where his lesson remains to be learned by all the Korahs and the deceived among people of this world at all time.

Finally, this is how the Holy Qur'an tells the story of Korah:

> **Korah was doubtless, of the people of Moses; but he acted insolently towards them: such were the treasures We had bestowed on him that their very keys would have been a burden to a body of strong men, behold, his people said to him: "Exult not, for God loveth not those who exult (in riches). But seek, with the (wealth) which God has bestowed on thee, the Home of the Hereafter, nor forget thy portion in this world: but do thou good, as God has been good to thee, and seek not (occasions for) mischief in the land: for God loves not those who do mischief".** [28:76–77]

## Killer conceit

Thus, Korah was living in a world that did not go beyond his narcissism. He had lost all touch with reality and common sense, unleashing his evil instincts to rule supreme with aggression and corruption. With his excessive wealth and treasures, the keys of which were proving very heavy to carry for a band of strong men, he was under the impression that he could manipulate people for his own ends without anyone objecting to his exploitative practices.

There, the believing elite among his people stood up to prevent his excesses. They gave him good counsel, not least to call to mind that it was God who gave him all that wealth and made it grow. Thus, he should not be carried away and fall victim to his own illusions of self-importance. They further advised him to be sensible and go back to the right path by adhering to the noble aims of private ownership. By always linking all his deeds to the notion of the hereafter, which should always prod him to do good, he would have been able to shun the glamour of this life that always urges man to be self-centred in his outlook. This does not mean, however, that one should ignore one's desires and needs. People have every right to satisfy them to some measure and not embark on the laissez-faire. They should seek to do what is good, as God has done them

good, desisting from making mischief in the land. God does not like the reckless, nor does He like those who have been corrupted by wealth.

Meanwhile, Korah did not seem to have time for carrying on with the debate because, to his mind, his greatness was self-made, thus:

> **He said: "This has been given to me because of a certain knowledge which I have". Did he not know that God had destroyed, before him, (whole) generations, which were superior to him in strength and greater in the amount (of riches) they had collected? But the wicked are not called (immediately) to account for their sins.** [28:78]

Thus, he appeared to reject the notion that there might have been another party who had contributed to his massive wealth. His words appeared to give his real feelings away, in that he did not want to entertain the idea that God might have had a hand in facilitating his amassing of wealth. He conceitedly concluded that he had made his fortune by his own efforts and experience. He maintained that no authority had the right to restrict his activity by any of its laws and regulations. He was of the opinion that it was within his prerogative to do whatever he liked.

The Holy Qur'an does not leave this sort of attitude unanswered. God had, in bygone days, annihilated many who were more powerful and richer than Korah. Thus, his power amounted to nothing before God's Might. Would his power and riches be capable of protecting him, as they had failed those before him?

This was scene one. As for scene two, this is how the Qur'an unfolds it:

> **So, he went forth among his people in the (pride of his worldly) glitter. Said those whose aim is the Life of this World: "Oh! That we had the like of what Korah has got! For he is truly a lord of mighty good fortune!" But those who had been granted (true) knowledge said: "Alas for you! The reward of God (in the Hereafter) is best for those who believe and work righteousness: but this none shall attain, save those who steadfastly persevere (in good)".** [28:79–80]

## Transient manifestations

He wanted to impress people with his worldly glitter, so that they should acquiesce to the feeling of inferiority. Making a daily show of his glamorous appearance, Korah had sought to make them yield to the

allure of wealth, and yet forgetting, in the process, that all that glitters is not gold.

This is the sight of those who are deceived by the exterior of things, as opposed to those who look beyond the façade. The first group experiences moments of basking in the glory, thus falling prey to life's momentary attraction, whereas the second group of people delve deep into matters, aware of the longer term, and seeing it in its true shape as it lays bare before their eyes, away from any aggrandizement. They know full well that the end of any power would be up to God. Accordingly, His reward is the one that is constant, not least because all appearances will fade away sooner or later.

## The finale

The Holy Qur'an does not suffice itself with presenting that scene in a dialogue setting. Rather, it puts the final touches to seal the fate of that arrogant man, thus:

> **Then We caused the earth to swallow up him and his house; and he had not (the least little) party to help him against God, nor could he defend himself. And those who had envied his position the day before began to say on the morrow: "Ah! It is indeed God Who enlarges the provision or restricts it, to any of His servants He pleases! Had it not been that God was gracious to us, He could have caused the earth to swallow us up! Ah! Those who reject God will assuredly never prosper".** [28:81–82]

Thus, the smokescreens had been removed from the eyes of the people who fell victim to the appeal of worldly gains, by witnessing the awful end of the man who was the epitome of oppression and tyranny.

In Korah's fate there is a lesson to be learned by those whose wealth blurs their vision so much that they no longer see sense after they have indulged in vanity, oppression, transgression and unbelief.

This has been the historical narrative about Korah. What is in it for us here and now?

## Our position on contemporary Korahs

There are several issues to be pondered:

### 1. Exposing the Korahs

The workers in the way of God should spare no effort in identifying contemporary Korahs and exposing them, just to prevent them from

becoming tools of subjugation and misguidance in society. This could be done by judging them against the yardstick of Korah, whose story has been told by the Holy Qur'an. This is so as to lend the sanctity of the Qur'an to the action of exposing them, in a genuine effort to keep the whole process free from all personal or political influences and considerations. In so doing, one should guarantee that the effort remains purely objective, i.e. in the cause of Islam, dispelling any doubts as to its motives.

This should help present the true picture of Islam, the religion that rejects and fights all transgressors and tyrants with the same enthusiasm with which it rejects and fights the forces of atheism and unbelief. This is attributed to the fact that, according to Islam, unbelief is of two types, (a) ideological, i.e. rejection and atheism, and (b) practical, i.e. transgression, aggression and oppression. Man could be an atheist in thought and a believer in practice, viz. by intellectually upholding the doctrine of the unbelievers and practising the creed of the believers. The opposite is true. That is, you might find people who believed in God, His messengers, and Messages, and yet they digressed from the right path and went astray, following in the footsteps of Satan.

Such lost people could leave an unpleasant legacy for Islam to contend with, let alone the adverse effect they have on society. This is by virtue of the confusion they sow in people's social and economic lives, for they seek to follow a policy of starving people and rendering them poor by exploiting and oppressing them. This situation would provide the exponents of unbelief with the opportunity to deceive people and turn them into unbelievers in the name of justice and make them dishonest in the name of freedom and dignity.

## 2. The hereafter is the prime objective of this life

In the short dialogue between Korah and the believers among his people, we can illustrate the Islamic standpoint on this life and the hereafter. We should further seek to understand the position of man on wealth, i.e. how should he go about using or investing it. This is with the aim of arriving at the balanced plan of Islam for man in life. It is to show man what is permissible and what is not, without any deviation or extremism.

The hereafter is not a strange world that is far removed from this world. By the same token, this life is not a strange one compared to the

hereafter. According to Islam, the hereafter represents the aim of this world in all its activities. It is, therefore, incumbent on the believers to take account of those realities in all that they do.

However, what is the right way to get to the hereafter? Is it by shunning this life and all its allure, desires, and happy moments, so much so that man would die before the actual time of death and run away before the time of running away?

The hereafter is not like this. On the contrary, it calls upon man to do his part in this life, without neglecting it. This is because it is a prerequisite for him to continue living and do his share in it as long as he lives inside a body that needs to be fed. Man should also recognize that he is a spiritual being who is in need of life that could breathe its fresh air through him. If we neglect human needs and desires and stifle them, closing off the wide windows of life to them, so much so that there is no way the spirit can breathe, man would be paralysed. Thus, the spirit would no longer roam in the wider universe, even though it might still be breathing.

The body should feel free to satisfy its needs and desires. Likewise, the spirit has every right to roam around with its aspirations and dreams, provided that it should not stray far from the hereafter.

The success in the hereafter is in the espousal of life's values, which God has desired that man should recognize readily in his conscience, conduct, and relations with others, so that this life would provide a good opportunity for peace, doing good, love, justice and belief.

This is the way the believer should conduct himself in life, while remaining faithful to the great goal that keeps his spirit aspiring to meeting with God in His mercy, compassion, wisdom, and system. According to this, man's relationship with his own wealth should be determined. He has every right to make use of his wealth to satisfy his needs, but in a sensible way. This is so because this is his share of this world. He has no right to spend it unwisely, nor is he allowed to spend it in evil ways and in perpetrating crime. Everything should be spent measuredly, without losing sight of what God has ordained. If the latter happens, that is not the right way to the final abode.

The hallmark of going about using one's wealth is that the use should be a realistic one, seeking the middle way. One should do good to others with one's wealth, as God has done them good. This should be seen from

the perspective of responsibility, which imply that the two are interchangeable. It should, however, not be viewed as doing someone a favour. One should also be aware of not using wealth to corrupt life's functions, such as the religious, social, political, and economic, as the capitalists, feudal lords, and the dishonest, whose hearts are filled with greed, would wish to do. That is because God does not like the corrupt ones.

### 3. How should the believers deal with the naive who have been spellbound by wealth?

Remembrance of God's reward should be readily infused in the hearts and minds of naive and weak people who are enchanted with Korah's type of wealth, power and arrogance. Keeping the hope of reaping that impending reward alive in the mind is far better than all things in life for the believers who do good deeds. That is because this is the type of work that would remain in this life and the hereafter. From another perspective, we should always remember the destiny of the likes of Korah, i.e. what would earn them divine punishment. This approach may prove worthwhile to rekindle deep-rooted belief, which may have gone into slumber due to forgetfulness, astonishment, and falling prey to deceptive manifestations. This approach should administer a much needed shock that may leave man pondering the truth, in the same way that those who were mislead by Korah's wealth, came to their senses after the shock of what had happened to Korah. He fell foul of the Law of God and, therefore, deserved His punishment. Thus, he was left defenceless and bereft of any support. Most importantly, his wealth, which he boasted about for long, was worthless. The ultimate lesson they learned from Korah's fate was that they returned to the right path, i.e. that of God, who bestows sustenance on whomever he willed on the basis of wisdom and justice. Their wishful thinking into becoming like him, when he was rich and powerful, came back to haunt them. That is, had they become like him, they would have faced the same destiny. And this is how they put it:

> **Had it not been that God was gracious to us, He could have caused the earth to swallow us up! Ah! Those who reject God will assuredly never prosper.** [28:82].

## The Owner of the Two Orchards

The Holy Qur'an never entertains the notion that affluence is a sublime quality of life, especially if it is denuded of belief and responsibility. It reiterates this theme in the story of two men, one of whom was wealthy, famous, and had many children, and the other was lacking in almost every department. Yet, the latter had an unshakable belief in God, His Omnipotence and the graces He had bestowed on man in everything. He was so aware of God's presence in his life that he felt His graces in every corner of his existence. He realized the importance and value of life, so much so that he did not get carried away in good times and did not give up on it when the going got tough. This is because he was contented that whether in goodness or in badness all is in the Hands of God, perpetuating the former or obliterating the latter. All that should remain is man's deeds in this life, be they good or bad.

Thus, the difference between the two men's viewpoints on life is self-evident from the Qur'anic dialogue between them. Comparing the two contrasting positions, we should be able to deduce the sublime principles and ideals Islam stands for. God Almighty says:

> **Set forth to them the parable of two men: for one of them We provided two gardens of grape-vines and surrounded them with date palms; in between the two We placed corn-fields. Each of those gardens brought forth its produce, and failed not in the least therein: in the midst of them We caused a river to flow. (Abundant) was the produce this man had: he said to his companion, in the course of a mutual argument: "more wealth have I than you, and more honour and power in (my following of) men". He went into his garden in a state (of mind) unjust to his soul: He said, "I deem not that this will ever perish, nor do I deem that the Hour (of Judgment) will (ever) come: Even if I am brought back to my Lord, I shall surely find (there) something better in exchange".**
>
> **His companion said to him, in the course of the argument with him: "Dost thou deny Him Who created thee out of dust, then out of a sperm-drop, then fashioned thee into a man? But (I think) for my part that He is God, My Lord, and none shall I associate with my Lord.**

**Why didst thou not, as thou went into thy garden, say: 'God's will (be done)! There is no power but with God!' If thou dost see me less than thee in wealth and sons, it may be that my Lord will give me something better than thy garden, and that He will send on thy garden thunderbolts (by way of reckoning) from heaven, making it (but) slippery sand! Or the water of the garden will run off underground so that thou wilt never be able to find it". So his fruits (and enjoyment) were encompassed (with ruin), and he remained twisting and turning his hands over what he had spent on his property, which had (now) tumbled to pieces to its very foundations, and he could only say, "Woe is me! Would I have never ascribed partners to my Lord and Cherisher!" Nor had he numbers to help him against God, nor was he able to deliver himself. There, the (only) protection comes from God, the True One. He is the Best to reward, and the Best to give success.** [18:32–44]

As is evident from the dialogue between the two men, the one with the two orchards started the argument from a point of strength, or so it appeared to him. He wanted the other man to yield to him, not least mentally, because he was richer and more powerful than his friend.

The richer of the two thought that he was secure in the resources he owned and that his affluence and dominion would last forever. He was also under the illusion that he was pretty confident of his bright future in this life and the hereafter because he thought highly of himself and his standing in the social ladder due to his financial muscle and the power he could wield because of it.

As for his friend, who was a true believer but poor, his position has come across strongly, with a hint of sarcasm about the allegation of his friend. This is because he did not rank wealth as a sublime merit worthy of making its owner weightier in the scales of values, nor did he think of it as a watertight surety for the future. It is so, for the mere reason that everything in this life is liable to turn into dust at any moment. Conversely, trust in God and drawing on His strength is the ultimate power in this life and the basis for confidence in the future, as it had been in the past.

On this solid ground, the poor believer started the debate with his friend, taunting him of surrendering to the allure of his wealth, so much so that it made him forget his Lord and become sceptical about the Last Day. So, he thought it his duty to remind him of the bounties God had

bestowed on him and his need for Him in everything. He went on to give him more good counsel, saying that he should always feel the need to be with God, through thick and thin, in that He is the source of power; He will give it to whomever He chooses and strip it off whoever He wishes.

As for his friend's stronger financial position and the larger number of offspring he had, compared to his position, it was nothing to go by, as long as they all were God-given and the fact that the poor believer had a strong sense of belonging to Him. Thus, he did not think it far-fetched that God might grant him a better grove than his friend's. The rich man's false sense of security in his wealth was no guarantee that God might not wipe it out leaving him with only a memory.

The whole picture becomes sharper in the final scene with the man standing over the ruins of what used to be his orchard, wringing his hands and saying:

> **Woe is me! Would I have never ascribed partners to my Lord and Cherisher! [18:42].**

And there, in the end, the moral becomes self-evident. The arrogant man, who thought that his wealth had made him impregnable, was standing flabbergasted and penniless. There was no one and nothing to turn to, just God who grants the graces and dispossesses of them as He wills. His is the true trusteeship over everything. Accordingly, believing in Him, seeking refuge with Him, and upholding His commands and desisting from what He ordained forbidden is the way to the right path, which leads to better destinations and rewards.

### The educational dimension of the story

This useful story could be turned into a moralistic one for children and adults alike. It could be turned into an artistic lively play, a portrait, and an axiom to guide people to the universal immortal truth, which points to the everlasting existence of God.

This educational tool might be taken a step further into writing about new situations of affluence and poverty, comparing them to belief and unbelief, although using the same theme but addressing different aspects. The creative works should serve as examples for marrying belief with life, in the progress towards an ever-towering pinnacle in the realm of God.

## The Disenfranchised and the Arrogant

Among the objectives of Islam is the emancipation of the human will from the yoke of the rich and powerful, with a view to liberating man from falling victim to their thoughts, desires and plans. The latter is seldom directed towards serving good aims for, in the main, they are put at the service of evil. Islam has sought to do this so that man could remain exercising his free will and be the master of his own destiny. This is bound to make man go about playing his part in society with his own convictions. This would steer him away from surrendering to the notion that others should determine the way he should think and go about his life, in other words, that others should pull the strings in conducting and controlling his behaviour.

### Everyone is the master of his own destiny

The Holy Qur'an has stressed this fact in many a verse, expressing the general guidelines for this question and facing man with the universal truth in that, whatever happens, man would in the end be responsible for his own actions. That is, no one would come to his rescue, because each would be busy answering for his or her own works.

As for those verses that talk in general terms about man's being accountable for his own actions, they make very clear the results he would reap of what he has done. They also do not hold him responsible for the guilt that had been earned by others.

> **Nay, is he not acquainted with what is in the Books of Moses – And of Abraham who fulfilled his engagements? – Namely, that no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another; that man can have nothing but what he strives for; that (the fruit of) his striving will soon come in sight: Then will he be rewarded with a reward complete. [53:36–41]**
>
> **Every soul draws the meed [what it deserves] of its acts on none. No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another. [6:164]**
>
> **Then shall anyone who has done an atom's weight of good, see it! And anyone who has done an atom's weight of evil, shall see it. [99:7–8].**
>
> **And the unbelievers say to those who believe: "Follow our path, and**

> **we will bear (the consequences) of your faults". Never in the least will they bear their faults: in fact they are liars! [29:12]**

Another aspect is captured in a dialogue on the Day of Judgement between the arrogant and the weak, when everyone will be called to answer for their actions. The dialogue takes twists and turns according to the degrees of relationship between the two groups of people, thus:

> **They will all be marshalled before God together: then will the weak say to those who were arrogant, "For us, we but followed you; can ye then avail us to all against the wrath of God?" They will reply, "If we had received the Guidance of God, we should have given it to you: to us it makes no difference (now) whether we rage, or bear (these torments) with patience: for ourselves there is no way of escape". [14:21]**

The verse restates how all will be held responsible before God's punishment, albeit the extent of the punishment will be commensurate to the crime committed. The verse also talks about the position of those who made their will subservient to others while they had the power to free themselves from that bondage. Yet, they were misled by the allure of power and wealth of the rich and followed them without pondering.

At that juncture, they are portrayed as though they have been wakened by an unsavoury situation, attempting to get rid of some of its gloom. Thus, they turn to their masters, asking them to reciprocate, i.e. to carry their burden at the Day of Judgement as they had done so for them in this life. That is, the master should offer protection to his followers in return for their following and submission. They plead with their masters, but to no avail:

> **Can ye then avail us to all against the wrath of God? [14:21].**

Nevertheless, the response of the arrogant folk shall come loud and clear, as the situation will be hopeless for both the parties. The arrogant ones admit that they cannot fend for themselves. How could they then defend the weak? There seems to be no way out apart from a complete capitulation:

> **To us it makes no difference (now) whether we rage, or bear (these torments) with patience: for ourselves there is no way of escape. [14:21].**

Their answer suggests that they are running away from facing the consequences, as they do not consider themselves responsible for

misleading the weak. To their mind, guidance to the right path is the exclusive domain of God, and since He did not guide them, they were not in a position to guide others, thus:

> **If we had received the Guidance of God, we should have given it to you. [14:21].**

This is the ultimate demoralized position.

Consequently, God projects, for the weak in this world, what the situation will look like on the Day of Judgement, so that they are prepared to shoulder the responsibility by themselves for what they have done in this life.

## Satan, powerless

The irony is that Satan begs to enter into the fray to disavow both the parties, in that he was not responsible for their going astray. He corroborates the religious fact in life that man has a free will and that there is no power on earth that can take it away from him without his permission.

This has been brilliantly captured in the following Qur'anic verse:

> **And Satan will say when the matter is decided: "It was God Who gave you a promise of Truth: I too promised, but I failed in my promise to you. I had no authority over you except to call you but ye listened to me: then reproach not me, but reproach your own souls. I cannot listen to your cries, nor can ye listen to mine. I reject your former act in associating me with God. For wrong-doers there must be a grievous penalty". [14:22]**

Thus, there is no power, even for Satan, to lead people astray. All that he can do is to suggest to man and entice him away from the right path. No coercion is involved. Man has all the time to ponder the two calls of God and Satan. Whichever direction he decides to follow will be his own choice. Why should man then blame Satan for allegedly tempting him away from the straight path to misguidance? Men have only themselves to blame because they are free.

The final word would be Satan's, who reiterates that man alone is responsible for his own actions because he exercised his free will. By the same token, Satan admits his responsibility for appealing to man to forsake the right path. So, neither would avail the other. In conclusion, not only will Satan have the final say, but he also has one more trick up

his sleeve. He claims that he does not condone some people's setting up partners to God. That is, the rebellious people would be left with neither help nor support.

## Disappointment

Other Qur'anic verses relate to us a different dialogue that would take place on the Day of Judgement between the oppressors and those who were deemed weak. The scene shows the oppressors, who have already shrugged off any responsibility for diverting the weak away from the right path, arguing that the weak had followed them out of instinctive inclinations. They argue that following the wrong path, and committing vile deeds, is something in their genes. In other words, they have the propensity for evil deeds inside them and time and circumstances permitting they tend to take to such nasty deeds:

> **The arrogant ones will say to those who had been despised: "Was it we who kept you back from Guidance after it reached you? Nay, rather, it was ye who transgressed". Those who had been despised will say to the arrogant ones: "Nay! It was a plot (of yours) by day and by night: Behold! Ye (constantly) ordered us to be ungrateful to God and to attribute equals to Him!" They will declare (their) repentance when they see the penalty: We shall put yokes on the necks of the unbelievers: It would only be requital for their (ill) deeds.** [34:32–33]

> **And they will turn to one another, and question one another. They will say: "It was ye who used to come to us from the right hand (of power and authority)!" They will reply: "Nay, ye yourselves had no Faith! Nor had we any authority over you. Nay, it was ye who were a people in obstinate rebellion! So now has been proved true, against us, the word of our Lord that we shall indeed (have to) taste (the punishment of our sins). We led you astray: for truly we were ourselves astray". Truly, that Day, they will (all) share in the Penalty.** [37:27–33]

They seem to have washed their hands of any responsibility for leading them astray because they maintain that they have intrinsic leanings for committing evil. They further argue that they turned down the invitation to join the camp of belief and guidance, again because they are inherently averse to it, not because they were under the influence of the oppressors. Thus, they are not justified in their claim. As for those

who were deemed weak, they do not seem to have the strength of conviction to respond to them. They only have disappointment and remorse for themselves.

However, they have a few parting shots: It is your covert scheming and approach, in that you have exploited our base desire for acquiring wealth and position in life to impose your hegemony over us, which we seemed to acquiesce to unconsciously.

The Qur'anic verses conclude the dialogue with the disappointment expressed by the losers prior to the meting out of the punishment and being shackled. This is to reinforce the principle of punishment or reward for man's actions, which is based on free will and responsibility:

> **So now has been proved true, against us, the word of our Lord that we shall indeed (have to) taste (the punishment of our sins).** [37:32].

## Contemporary lessons

There are a few lessons to be learned from these human examples:

### 1. Freedom of belief vs. freedom of willpower

The above-quoted Qur'anic verses stress the fact that man has absolute freedom in what he wants to believe in and what he wants to embark on or abandon. God has created him and granted him the freedom and will to think independently. Man should translate this freedom into solid belief, faith, determination and good deeds. He is, though, not free to surrender his freedom to others under the pretext that he could fall under their influences, be they moral or material. It is noteworthy that however powerful others may be, their means of exerting pressure to sway man from what he thinks right shall not exceed temptation, harassment and threats. These tactics may pay off in weakening one's resolve, which may lead to surrender. Yet, man is capable of putting up a determined defence to resist the tactics of the carrot and stick with the intellectual power, conviction, and willpower God has endowed him with. In this regard, one can draw on the strength of the prophetic Messages.

Man has to answer for his own actions before God, especially if he takes leave of his senses and forgets about his message in life. Likewise, there will be no excuse if he falls victim to his own desires, inclinations, and frailties, or yields to tyrants, oppressors, and those who lost their way.

As for external pressure and coercion, to which the soul remains indisposed and with which the heart does not feel at ease, they have no bearing on the question of responsibility. In those circumstances man would not be free to do what he likes, although he is free to reject what he does not like notionally. As such, the underlying principle of freedom in Islam is that man has a natural right to freedom of choice. However, whether he would, in practice, be able to exercise his freedom without constraints or pressure is a different matter.

## 2. The spectacle of the arrogant people

The picture the Holy Qur'an depicts of the arrogant people is not only one that describes their situation at the Day of Judgement, especially the destiny that would await them there and the trauma they would go through. It is a kind of analytical study of their mindset. That is, the way they conduct themselves with other people, and how they feel a sense of superiority and authority. Their relations with others are usually based on a master/slave analogy. They feel that they are not responsible, either morally or lawfully, for the actions of the people who follow them and serve their whims. Denying any relationship with, or any extended responsibility for, the actions of their subordinates is a tactic intended to save their own skin.

The Holy Qur'an wants to paint the same picture for those people in this life, for the life hereafter is a reflection of this one. Resurrection will not happen in a different form or thought. Rather, man, in his original copy, will be summoned to appear at the Day of Judgement before the Almighty to answer for his actions in this life, thus:

> **But those who were blind in this world, will be blind in the hereafter, and most astray from the Path.** [17:72].

If this is their situation in this life, how could man trust them here or in the hereafter, so long as they have such a mentality, one that makes them abdicate responsibility at the first warning of danger.

## 3. Practical approach

In the thick of ideological and social struggle, where we face multi-faceted exploitative practices of the arrogant elite, especially its subjugation of the weaker sections of society, we should always call to mind the previous two points. We should always bear in mind that the forces of condescension seek to use the poor and naive for their own

wicked ends, not least unbelief, misguidance, aggression, and fighting the truth in the name of justice. Yet in no time they tend to absolve themselves of any responsibility:

> **(Their allies deceived them), like the Evil One, when he says to man, 'Deny God': but when (man) denies God, (the Evil One) says, 'I am free of thee: I do fear God, the Lord of the Worlds!'.** [59:16].

The approach to the process of calling to mind and exposing the practices of the forces of arrogance should be to rouse a sense of freedom and individual responsibility. Exposing the practices of the arrogant people towards those who are deemed weak could be one such approach. Raising awareness among the ranks of the disadvantaged group, with a view to making them reconsider their subservience to the privileged one, could be another. This is particularly so, in the light of the impending punishment that is in store for them should they not mend their ways.

Perhaps this was the rationale behind depicting the scenes of the Day of Judgement ahead of time. Maybe it is meant to make people get prepared for that Day in advance and in ample time, because both lives are reflections of one another. The other point that needs pondering is the nature of the relationship between the two groups and how each one should face up to its own responsibility when they are called to book.

We reckon that taking the disenfranchised group under the wing of Islamic activism, providing its members with the political, social, and spiritual awareness through the realities of life, and strengthening their spirit of faith, is capable of extending and solidifying the base of Islamic activism in people's lives. This should be with the aim of developing and bettering the life of man by building a better system.

## The Inmates of Hellfire in a Squabble

### First vs. last

In the same context, i.e. every human is responsible for his/her own actions, the Holy Qur'an presents another group of people whose members mimic one another without elements of weakness or strength. That is, the factors of weakness or strength, as was the case with the weak and arrogant groups of people, are not in play here. It seems these groups have a number of considerations in common. It could be one or more of the following: geography, language, economic ties, and a new generation following in the footsteps of an old one, mainly because the existing generation feels strongly about what they see as sacred about their ancestors.

This is how the Holy Qur'an depicts the scene and dialogue:

> **Who is more unjust than one who invents a lie against God or rejects His Signs? For such, their portion appointed must reach them from the Book (of Decrees): until, when our messengers (of death) arrive and take their souls, they say: "Where are the things that ye used to invoke besides God?" They will reply, "They have left us in the lurch," And they will bear witness against themselves, that they had rejected God. He will say: "Enter ye in the company of the peoples who passed away before you – men and jinn, – into the Fire". Every time a new people enters, it curses its sister-people (that went before), until they follow each other, all into the Fire. Saith the last about the first: "Our Lord! It is these that misled us: so give them a double penalty in the Fire". He will say: "Doubled for all": but this ye do not understand. Then the first will say to the last: "See then! No advantage have ye over us; so taste ye of the penalty for all that ye did!"** [7:37–39]

These holy verses present the situation in two scenes:

### 1. The unbelievers and God's messengers of death

Before taking their spirits, the angels of death take them to task: Where are those whom you used to call upon to the exclusion of God?

Let them come to your rescue in this dire situation, should they possess any of the divine power or authority.

The answer comes tinged with disappointment that reveals a sense of total loss: They are nowhere. We are left in a limbo. Thus, there is no hope for any escape, nor is there any denying the fact that they admitted their unbelief. There they are alone before God to answer for their crimes. The curtains are drawn on this scene, leaving us, judging by the general climate, with the conclusion that the mission was over and that the perpetrators were on their way to the final abode.

## 2. The offenders in hellfire

A yell comes from the direction of God, ordering those unbelievers to march to hellfire to face the same destiny that previous groups of both the human race and jinn have already faced. Amid the clamour, we hear the newly convicted criminals trading insults and recriminations with the previously convicted ones. The mutual acrimony, rage, and bitterness between yesterday's fraternities of unbelief are self-evident. They seem to have nothing except for apportioning blame and hopelessly distancing themselves from one another.

There we are before the spectacle of the cries and fury of a people who feel let down, rightly or wrongly, in a bid to ameliorate the shock they feel by trying to lay the blame on others.

A sort of indirect argument starts in earnest. The newly arrived group turn to God, beseeching Him to increase the suffering of the first arrivals because they maintain that they were responsible for leading people astray.

Another shout is heard from the direction of God: Each one of you will get a double share of torment. This is because those who passed away before you went astray and helped you follow them in error. As for you, you too went astray and helped them carry out their plan in misleading you, not least by responding to the call of the leaders among them[1]. And yet, you do not know the nature of the torment so that you can comprehend how it will be doubled. Scornfully, the first group says to the last one: You have done us no favours. We are all responsible for the vile deeds we have done.

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[1]at-Tabatabaie, *al-Mizan fi Tafseeril* Qur'an vol. 8, p. 115.

The curtain is thus drawn on the final scene in the story for another chapter to begin, where man has already learned a lesson to put to use in his life, so that he can avoid the same fate, at the Day of Judgement, of those people whose lot was degradation, shame, and torture.

## Practical Lessons

We should discern the moral of this situation, which God has played for us before the time of its actual occurrence so that we are mindful not to fall into the same trap those people fell in, by taking stock of the situation, especially the following:

### 1. Rejecting submissiveness

In this regard, we should reiterate what we have already mentioned, i.e. one must reject subservience in matters of doctrine, practice, and position taking. That is, it is fundamental that one should be independent in arriving at one's own convictions because any justification for not doing so by virtue of falling under the sway of others is just not a good enough reason for ducking the responsibility and eventually bearing the consequences in this life and the hereafter.

### 2. Evil doctrine incapable of maintaining spiritual unison

Maintaining ties between individuals and groups on the basis of malevolent doctrines or evil conduct is not a guarantee for the spiritual and moral unity that could make those individuals and groups empathize with one another and willingly bear the consequences of their responsibility. This is simply because deviation is not governed by ideology; rather, it is based, in the main, on narrow self-interests and emotional relations. This is bound to make people abandon one another in adversity. The result would then be recriminations, apportioning blame, and trying to pin the responsibility on the other party.

### 3. Studying people's position taking

The workers in the way of God Almighty are urged to study deeply atheistic and devious tendencies, which appear to have listening ears within our Muslim societies. They should also study what political clout or military or economic power these trends can wield that might attract people's fascination and eventually cause them to fall under their sway. A third element could be the material temptation that the proponents of these trends can exercise, which might find its way into the hearts and

minds of people who could easily be recruited to their cause. This could happen to people without their giving the invasive ideologies due consideration, i.e. whether they are good or bad. However, in order to justify their position, the people who embraced those trends could start the process of soul-searching.

Studying those tendencies in detail should prove vital, especially if we can put our fingers on the reasons and motives behind the attempts of the proponents of those trends to push people into accepting them. This should, though, be done away from pondering matters of right and wrong. There and then, we could draw up a practical plan with the aim of exposing the ulterior motives of those tendencies and confront the people who fell prey to them with our findings. The position could then be linked to the question of freedom, dignity, and independent judgement. It could also be used as a spur to rekindle the ambers of belief in the consciences of the deceived. We should also outpace those tendencies by not giving them the opportunity to utilize unusual circumstances in sowing more misguidance. Raising awareness among the masses can protect them from yielding to those adverse circumstances.

It could also prove valuable to make people aware of the ideological as well as moral double standards between what they believe in and what they practise, highlighting the negative aspects of their conduct. This could provide them with food for thought to reflect on the double standards they seem to be practising. Dwelling on the Qur'anic verses could provide some excellent lessons that would make the position that has been taken a matter of destiny in this life and the hereafter. This should, in turn, make man refrain from taking hasty decisions and avoid paying lip service to, and being governed by, emotions in matters of destiny. Submitting to such transient desires could be tolerated in special insignificant cases. It is not acceptable in decisive matters that have a bearing on this life and the hereafter.

### Dialogue with God

In this dialogue, which will take place on the Day of Judgement, we are introduced to the inmates of hellfire being quizzed about the question of belief and unbelief. With His indelible evidence, God reminds them of the respite he gave them in this life to mend their ways. Yet, they chose to tarry, rebelling against Him, making fun of His friends and waging war against them. After all this, the idea of their requesting another chance to

return to this life and do good sounds ludicrous. This is because they will certainly go back to their old ways, not least because their choosing to go wrong was not because the evidence was not overwhelming; rather, they preferred taking the road of misguidance over that of belief and the transience of this life to the eternity of the hereafter. Moreover, they did not seem to take notice of time, which was passing them by, so much so that they were oblivious to its passing. Thus, the debate draws to a close and quiet prevails for they did not have anything else to talk about:

> **"Were not My Signs rehearsed to you, and ye did but treat them as falsehood?" They will say: "our Lord! Our misfortune overwhelmed us, and we became a people astray! Our Lord! Bring us out of this: if ever we return (to Evil), then shall we be wrong-doers indeed!" He will say: "Be ye driven into it (with ignominy)! And speak ye not to Me! A part of My servants there was, who used to pray 'our Lord! We believe; then do Thou forgive us, and have mercy upon us: For Thou art the Best of those who show mercy!' But ye treated them with ridicule, so much so that (ridicule of) them made you forget My Message while ye were laughing at them! I have rewarded them this Day for their patience and constancy: they are indeed the ones that have achieved Bliss". He will say: "What number of years did ye stay on earth?" They will say: "We stayed a day or part of a day: but ask those who keep account". He will say: "Ye stayed not but a little – if ye had only known! Did ye then think that We had created you in jest, and that ye would not be brought back to Us (for account)?" [23:105–115]**

They were playing a frivolous game, as though God has created life for them as a pastime. As a result, they do not appear to have time for a reasoned and unemotional debate. All they can do is make fun of the ideals, of what is sacred, and of the peaceful and forbearing believers who show strong spirit of faith in adversity. There, on the Day of Judgement, the believers will have their turn in laughing at the wrongdoers, while celebrating their triumph.

It seems the unbelievers are not deterred by the fate that befell them, asking for yet another reprieve to start a new life. However, their time was up:

> **If thou couldst but see when they are confronted with the Fire! They will say: "Would that we were but sent back! Then would we not reject the Signs of our Lord, but would be amongst those who**

**believe!" Yea, in their own (eyes) will become manifest what before they concealed. But if they were returned, they would certainly relapse to the things they were forbidden, for they are indeed liars.** [6:27–28]

This is the rationale behind the debate God will have conducted with this type of people. They do not seem to understand life as He has ordained it to be lived, i.e. an opportunity for good work and ensuring the materialization of God's will on earth, in establishing a sound and balanced system. After that, all return to God to see the result of their labour. There and then, every soul would be held accountable for the good or evil that it had done, and subsequently either reaping the reward or receiving the punishment would happen. Therefore, treating life as pastime and banter does not make any sense. God wants us to steer clear of this path and instead aspire for fulfilling the sublime goal of life. We should make use of our lifetime to turn every corner in it into a beehive, with the aim of establishing the desired system for life; a system that is based on His Message, in whose cause His messengers toiled. Consequently, there should be no room for any work that is not capable of fulfilling that objective or contributing to its fulfilment. There should as well be no scope for any move that does not serve the said objective. Even leisure times, aimed at providing a respite for the soul, unwinding, and recharging one's batteries, should be directed in a sensible way, i.e. serving the continuity of the good work with newly found vigour.

There may be a moral behind the focus, during the divine trial of the unbelievers, on their poking fun on the believers, so much so that indulging in this practice had made the unbelievers forget their God. In such a climate, the unbelievers had become impervious to thinking straight, especially about the consequences of their actions. They even did not take seriously the faith of the believers that could have augured well for life. It seems all they were concerned with was turning the believers into an object of derision and laughter. To their mind, the believers' lowly standing in the social order induced this practice; it might also have been triggered by the believers' faith, practices, and sublime moral fibre, which, to the unbelievers, were outlandish.

The verses turn to the believers who put up with the incessant onslaught, showing patience and strength of character in the face of abuse. They are portrayed as suppressing any reaction that might be

interpreted as though it was a personal one. The believers were inclined to rise above such furious reactions when dealing with others, because they knew very well that it would not lead to any meaningful outcome, which might serve the end result. That is, the spread of the Message in the context of the struggle to establish belief on earth. Thus, the believers showed utmost forbearance wherever they felt it would be for the benefit of the ultimate goal. However, should the interest of the process of spreading the Message dictate that a change of approach is desirable, a switch to a different plan or approach would then be envisaged.

The final scene shows the unbelievers, who used to be sarcastic about the believers before, being invited to ponder their destiny, in hellfire, as opposed to that of the believers, whose final abode is in paradise, having secured the pleasure of God. However, the verses should remain a constant reminder to man to keep reflecting on life. This would, without doubt, reap the best results and shun the cynicism with which man treats the bearers of the Message and their followers. Man should, as an alternative, resort to engaging in reasoned argument, with a view to getting to the truth and eventually the right path.

### The transgressors and the hypocrites vs. the believers

On the Day of Judgement, the modes of dialogue vary. The following is another dialogue where debate is not conducted face to face, but rather, by way of voices emanating from here and there, i.e. argument and counter-argument on a particular subject.

Here is an example of this type of dialogue. It takes place, although indirectly, between the transgressors and the believers:

> **And thou wilt see the wrongdoers, when in sight of the penalty, Say: "Is there any way (to effect) a return?" And thou wilt see them brought forward to the (penalty), in a humble frame of mind because of (their) disgrace, (and) looking with a stealthy glance. And the believers will say: "Those are indeed in loss, who have given to perdition their own selves and those belonging to them on the Day of Judgement. Behold! Truly the wrongdoers are in a lasting penalty!"** [42:44–45]

The opening soundings comes from the direction of the wrongdoers, apparently talking to themselves in reaction to the torment they are confronted with. They hypothetically pose the question as to the possibility of back pedalling, i.e. a return to this life, so that they could take corrective

action. The situation is fast reaching a climax for they are being paraded before hellfire, having nothing for protection from the anguish.

The answer to their question comes from the other side, concluding that the loss is not only confined to the moral and material sides of this world, in that there may be a possibility of getting compensation in the hereafter. The real loss is, indeed, that of man's losing himself and his kin in the hereafter; a loss that is induced by man's transgressing against his soul, and by his rebellion and going astray. Thus, there is no use in trying to go back.

There is another scene that is richer in detail and more distinctive than the one we have just seen. In this scene, the unbelievers are on one side and the believers on the other, trading these verbal exchanges:

> **One Day will the hypocrites – men and women – say to the believers: "Wait for us! Let us borrow (a light) from your light!" It will be said: "Turn ye back to your rear! Then seek a light (where ye can)!" So a wall will be put up between them, with a gate therein. Within it will be Mercy throughout, and without it, all alongside, will be (Wrath and) punishment! (Those without) will call out, "Were we not with you?" (The others) will reply, "True! But ye led yourselves into temptation; ye looked forward (to our ruin); ye doubted (God's Promise); and (your false) desires deceived you; until there issued the Command of God. And the deceiver deceived you in respect of God. This Day shall no ransom be accepted of you, nor of those who rejected God. Your abode is the Fire: that is the proper place to claim you: and an evil refuge it is!"** [57:13–15]

At first, the hypocrites ask the believers for a glimpse of their light, so that they can light the darkness they are in. The believers' answer comes in the negative. That is so, because they have no right to that light which floods from the springs of pure belief. Instead, it is suggested that they seek light from behind them, if there was such light, because that place is the one where their final abode is. It is where they would be punished for what they had committed before their arrival. Then the lightening dialogue, which is characterized by entreating, comes to an abrupt end. Immediately thereafter, a wall is erected between the two groups. That wall has two sides, one overlooks paradise, where mercy and good are, and the other overlooks hellfire, where torment and wrath are. An exclamation then follows as to why the two groups were separated, while they were together, and visiting one another in this world? The answer

comes loud and clear: The criterion for selecting people and gathering them together in this world is not consensus. It is the meeting of minds, working together, and the universal outlook to life, i.e. the general code of practice. Should any of these diverge – atheism vs. belief, the right path vs. the crooked one, short-sightedness vs. wider vision (transcending this life to the hereafter) – and the former parallel lines lead to two diametrically opposed destinations, that of God and that of Satan, the terminals are bound to be different, viz. heaven and hell respectively.

In the light of this, the answer is determined: In the first life, we were together. But, you pushed yourselves in the thick of troublemaking and scepticism. You did not show openness to the truth and ran after wishful thinking. Satan deluded you away from God, to the extent that you forgot His remembrance. Your actions have led you to this ending. No ransom would be accepted from you in as much as it would not be accepted from the unbelievers because you are of the same ilk. You have nothing to look forward to, apart from hellfire that is your lot and final abode.

The dialogue then ends, leaving us to reflect on those scenes, on the Day of Judgement, and take heed of the fate that would have become the people depicted therein.

To this end, these holy verses beckon the workers in the way of God to present the scenes they depict and the meanings they aspire to give to people, with a view to making them ponder and draw lessons from them. This would be in response to what the Holy Qur'an has aspired to. That is, by transporting man to those future situations on the Day of Judgement, it has aimed to make him reflect on those realities, and the people involved in them, and be prepared not to follow their example, by avoiding the path they were treading for the right one.

In this climate, we will encounter some more Qur'anic verses dealing with the dialogue between the believers and unbelievers on the reasons that landed the unbelievers in hellfire. In those verses we will try to familiarize ourselves with the distinctive characteristics of the party that deviated from the right path. Studying their conduct should shed some light on their state of mind and psyche. We will soon find out that they perceive their lifetime in this world as an opportunity to reinforce their egoistic inclinations, especially by indulging in pastime practices instead of behaving responsibly in this life in private and public alike. The Holy

Qur'an then takes us back to life to put us in the scene of how they led their life, especially their position on the calls to embrace the truth, which were aimed at making them remember God and His Messages:

> **Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds, except the Companions of the Right Hand. (They will be) in Gardens (of Delight): they will question each other, and (ask) of the sinners: "What led you into Hell Fire?" They will say: "We were not of those who prayed; nor were we of those who fed the indigent; but we used to talk vanities with vain talkers; and we used to deny the Day of Judgment, until there came to us (the Hour) that is certain". Then, will no intercession of (any) intercessors profit them? Then what is the matter with them that they turn away from admonition? – As if they were affrighted asses, fleeing from a lion! Forsooth, each one of them wants to be given scrolls (of revelation) spread out! By no means! But they fear not the Hereafter.** [74:38–53]

As is evident, each soul's responsibility was well defined. Thus, each soul is held responsible for that which it had done, whether good or bad. The verdict is read out pursuant to the debits and credits in the balance sheet. The doers of good deeds would end up enjoying freedom. The wrongdoers would languish in torment until God's mercy comes their way to give them a reprieve, should there be room for mercy. The Companions of the Right Hand would be given special treatment because they managed to check their desires before the temptations of this life; instead, they led a life of complete submission to God. Thus, they are given leave to ask about the fate of others in a reproaching manner, putting them face-to-face before their true criminal selves.

## Reason for going astray

The criminals would reply, giving the causes for their ideological and practical malpractices:

**1. "We were not of those who prayed".** They maintain that the reasons for their being far away from God, both by doctrine and conscience, was due to neglecting the performance of prayer. Without doubt, prayer is the believer's vehicle for having audience with God. The believer's standing before God would always bring to his mind the importance of that union, serving as a reminder for him to conduct himself within the bounds of God's laws and regulations.

**2. "Nor were we of those who fed the indigent".** This is the second factor as to why the unbelievers had gone astray. That is, when they lived life away from the path of belief, they did not have a sense of responsibility for those who did not have the means to live a dignified life because of want. The unbelievers lived a cocooned life that insulated them from thinking of other people who might be in need of their help.

Their mindset sharply defines the chasm between a person who thinks that the intellectual, physical, or financial powers they are endowed with are for the common interest, and thus bear the responsibility for their fellow humans who are in need of their help, and people who think that those powers are some kind of personal concession, which should put them in a different league where they should be above others.

**3. "But we used to talk vanities with vain talkers".** They live to indulge with others in falsehood. They do not seem to attach any importance to, or responsibility for, the words, in that they do not mind if what they utter has a devastating effect on people. That is because they behave irresponsibly, free from any religious controls. They live life to the full in idle talk and in satisfying their unbridled innate inclinations.

**4. "And we used to deny the Day of Judgment".** Denial is the hallmark of their going astray in all aspects of their life, both private and public. This is because those who choose not to believe in the Day of Judgement and think that this life is the last opportunity for man to live, do not see any motive that could spur them into behaving responsibly and leading a disciplined and honest life and celebrate its sublime values. So, since they do not believe that they will be held accountable, they do not seem to have any sense of responsibility.

Running away from God and His Messages is a way of abdicating one's responsibility in this life. Even so, once they are faced with death, which they tended to reject before, it serves as a wake-up call to them from their long slumber. However, this call has come rather too late. They have been caught unawares. There is neither profit they could use, nor hope for any help coming from any quarter to save their skins.

The Holy Qur'an concludes the dialogue by going back to discuss the reason for going astray. In short, it is for shying away from remembrance and being reminded of the dangers. Also, it is for showing unyielding intransigence in their stand on the Signs of God and His Messages. In

some way, their flight from God's messengers is akin to that of donkeys fleeing before an attacking lion. They were requesting the prophets to provide them [as evidence] with scrolls of revelations spread out. However, the Holy Qur'an hastens to add that the issue is not as they wish to portray it, in that it was the rejection of the hereafter that prevented them from following the footsteps of the truth.

The Qur'an makes one more move, by returning us, one more time, to the atmosphere of the hereafter, so that we can have the opportunity for reconsidering our positions here and now. This is the rationale behind the story/dialogue in the Holy Qur'an:

> **Nay, this surely is an admonition: Let any who will, keep it in remembrance!** [74:54–55].

## The Believer Among the Pharaohs

Among the stations of progress of the prophetic missions and the Divine doctrine, the Holy Qur'an discusses the history of the communities of unbelief to which the messengers were sent. However, amid the ups and downs, the Qur'an presents us with striking examples of personalities whose emergence at certain stages of the prophetic missions manifests extraordinary phenomena, especially when it comes to unequivocal position-taking at critical historical moments.

It is not a far-fetched notion to find a believer living amidst a community of unbelief. Yet it could prove highly unlikely to find such a person in the highest echelons of power, a regime that is a patron of the movement of unbelief, defending it against any force that opposes it. The vehement and instinctive protection by the centre of power is understandable because it is viewed as the source of all the concessions the ruler and his clique are enjoying and the luxurious life they are leading. Thus, the ruling elite would feel insecure in their positions if belief ruled supreme. It is because they think that it would detract from their character and undermine their position. An example of this state of affairs is that of Pharaoh and his society. He ruled people, believing that they thought that his position was sacrosanct because of his embodying divinity or having part thereof. To his mind, this justified his demanding others to submit to, and sanctify, him.

### Glowing phenomenon

We may, therefore, conclude that the believer who was in the midst of the Pharaohs represents a shining example, which is worth thinking about. It is a glimmer of hope to dispel the darkness of despondency. This is particularly so, when Muslim activists find themselves with their backs to the wall. Bringing the picture of that good man to mind would provide the incentive for the activists to carry on. His example would provide that much needed boost, regardless of all the manifestations of the lustre of power and privileges.

The Holy Qur'an has painted a picture for the believer in the midst of the Pharaohs as the epitome of the trusted bearer of the Message who

feels sorry for his people for their groping in darkness. Thus, his words to them tell of his real feelings for them. He spares no effort in opening a window of opportunity so that the light of the truth might shine on them and guide them aright.

After the calm and quiet call he has issued to them, he goes forth proclaiming his message with fortitude that is tinged with melancholy for them. Nevertheless, his earnest words will have no room for mincing, as he has to open the door wide for the truth with determination and vigour, since the softly-softly approach with them does not seem to pay off.

The great importance of this believer is the strength of his feelings about the question of belief. Not only does his true propensity to belief make him an idealistic person busy with his personal faith, which would guarantee him a place in heaven, but also he feels responsible for guiding his fellow humans to the right path. In him, we are introduced to an exemplary believer who should be emulated in every step. Many of today's believers should take a leaf out of his book. That is, the type of believers who think that their responsibility stops at performing acts of religious worship, i.e. short of public responsibility, in the belief that it is the way to save one's skin on the Day of Judgement. They seem to convince themselves that ideological, social, and military challenges, which subject man to perils, are not their concern because there are other people who can face up to them.

In the case of the believer who is the subject of our discussion, individual and collective responsibilities are inseparable. So, while fulfilling responsibility on a personal level, in order to save himself on the Day of Judgement, he used to do his bit for others. This is because the main thrust of belief is that all believers should have affinity with each other. In other words, they should all feel a kind of a collective responsibility and that they are small messengers each in their own right and according to their own capabilities. They all experience the vitality of the message, translating words and deeds into lively currents moving in more than one direction, so that they converge to serve the ultimate goal, i.e. the prosperity of man under the sway of God's Law and Message.

The believer among the Pharaohs was not concealing his faith for fear of reprisals because it looks as though he was in a very influential position in the hierarchy of power. He resorted to that to avail himself of much needed freedom of movement from within, to help spread the message in a practical and adaptable manner, assuming neutrality and

tolerance. This approach was intended to counter Pharaoh's extremist views and his overwrought attitude, which could have spelled disaster for the message and the messenger. He started quietly and discreetly to demolish Pharaoh's plans against Moses (a.s.) by spreading the word, the main thrust of which urged reflection and caution. His words, which had the power of belief, yielded results by having the required impact on Pharaoh's shaky position. This was evident in Pharaoh's pleadings with his people to take a strong stand against Moses, but to no avail. From the dialogue he conducted with his people, the believer seemed to have been working tirelessly to undermine Pharaoh's position from within. This policy was aimed at draining the pressure that was being exerted on the Message, making the messenger have a firmer foothold. He was doing this from a position of strength that he managed to muster. This is evident from the Qur'anic narrative, which will ensue, about how he used to speak his mind on all issues without credible opposition.

## Achieving the goal with ease

The Holy Qur'an speaks about that believer and his stand in the context of the Moses and Pharaoh story. Here is another highlight of the story where Pharaoh is depicted meeting with his people, asking their permission to kill Moses (a.s.), under the pretext of keeping peace and order in the land. No doubt these are the same excuses that tyrants, since the dawn of history, have given to liquidate their opponents among the bearers of principles and proponents of new reformist ideologies.

At this juncture, the role that this believer is going to play, should prove vital. Using his position of power within the close-knit circle of Pharaoh, and avoiding any direct clash with his master, he turns to the people, preventing them from agreeing to Pharaoh's request. This is a new type of dialogue where the interlocutors are conducting the dialogue through a third party. Basically, the trading of arguments is done in this manner because the prime party to dialogue is not keen on getting to the truth through direct dialogue for, according to him, it is a matter of power that should prevail, not one of the truth that should be upheld. That is why criticising or arguing with him would prove ineffective, let alone stifling the voice of the truth and installing barriers between the truth and the masses. The most effective way was to appeal directly to the hearts and minds of the people, with a reasoned counter-argument, to dismiss Pharaoh's demand to kill Moses. This was done away from the

pressures of the ruler. Such an approach would certainly yield vital results.

In this breathtaking dialogue neither Pharaoh's voice, nor that of the believer is heard. Instead Moses' voice is sometimes heard flowing harmoniously to give the whole picture of the progress of the prophetic noble mission, especially, on the part of the messenger and the tyrant. Moreover, the believer is always there to do his share. The opposing parties were vying to lead society to what they were propagating. At the same time, society did not seem to be playing an important part in all the traffic that was coming from all sides, apart from the fact that its members had been receptive to all the mental and psychological pressures, yet in a passive way. Society did not appear to be having a say in all that was happening, in that it was not given the opportunity to exercise its free will, not least because it was saddled by the ruler and his propaganda machine breathing down its neck. Society was left to its own devices to try to find some sort of accommodation between the remnants of old and its interests on the one hand and its real feelings on the other.

Now, let us dwell on the whole story of the believer amongst the Pharaohs as it is told by the Holy Qur'an:

> **Said Pharaoh: "Leave me to slay Moses; and let him call on his Lord! What I fear is lest he should change your religion, or lest he should cause mischief to appear in the land!" Moses said: "I have indeed called upon my Lord and your Lord (for protection) from every arrogant one who believes not in the Day of Account!" A believer, a man from among the people of Pharaoh, who had concealed his faith, said: "Will ye slay a man because he says, 'My Lord is God'? – When he has indeed come to you with Clear (Signs) from your Lord? And if he be a liar, on him is (the sin of) his lie: but, if he is telling the Truth, then will fall on you something of the (calamity) of which he warns you: Truly God guides not one who transgresses and lies! O my People! Yours is the dominion this day: Ye have the upper hand in the land: but who will help us from the Punishment of God, should it befall us?" Pharaoh said: "I but point out to you that which I see (myself); nor do I guide you but to the Path of Right!"**
>
> **Then said the man who believed: "O my people! Truly I do fear for you something like the Day (of disaster) of the Confederates (in sin)! – Something like the fate of the People of Noah, the 'Ad, and the Thamud, and those who came after them: but God never wishes**

**injustice to his Servants. And O my people! I fear for you a Day when there will be Mutual calling (and wailing), – A Day when ye shall turn your backs and flee: No defender shall ye have from God: Any whom God leaves to stray, there is none to guide... And to you there came Joseph in times gone by, with Clear Signs, but ye ceased not to doubt of the (Mission) for which he had come: At length, when he died, ye said: 'No apostle will God send after him.' thus doth God leave to stray such as transgress and live in doubt, – (Such) as dispute about the Signs of God, without any authority that hath reached them, grievous and odious (is such conduct) in the sight of God and of the Believers. Thus doth God, seal up every heart – of arrogant and obstinate Transgressors".**

**Pharaoh said: "O Haman! Build me a lofty palace, that I may attain the ways and means – The ways and means of (reaching) the heavens, and that I may mount up to the God of Moses: But as far as I am concerned, I think (Moses) is a liar!" Thus was made alluring, in Pharaoh's eyes, the evil of his deeds, and he was hindered from the Path; and the plot of Pharaoh led to nothing but perdition (for him).**

**The man who believed said further: "O my people! Follow me: I will lead you to the Path of Right. O my people! This life of the present is nothing but (temporary) convenience: It is the Hereafter that is the Home that will last. He that works evil will not be requited but by the like thereof: and he that works a righteous deed – whether man or woman – and is a Believer– such will enter the Garden (of Bliss): Therein will they have abundance without measure. And O my people! How (strange) it is for me to call you to Salvation while ye call me to the Fire! Ye do call upon me to blaspheme against God, and to join with Him partners of whom I have no knowledge; and I call you to the Exalted in Power, Who forgives again and again! Without doubt ye do call me to one who is not fit to be called to, whether in this world, or in the Hereafter; our return will be to God; and the transgressors will be Companions of the Fire! Soon will ye remember what I say to you (now), My (own) affair I commit to God: for God (ever) watches over His Servants". Then God saved him from (every) ill that they plotted (against him), but the brunt of the penalty encompassed on all sides the People of Pharaoh. [40:26–45]**

At first, we can see the believer showing a semblance of neutrality, i.e. he is apparently not concerned with the subject of dispute. He is posing

the question as a member of the family, as the issue is Pharaoh's request of his people to give him the permission to kill Moses, on account of preserving the faith and maintaining peace and order, in that Moses came up with a mission to subvert all that.

At this point, the distinctive calming voice of Moses is heard again. He stands defiant against Pharaoh's threat of death, proclaiming loudly that he seeks refuge in the power of God, his Lord and theirs, from death. He reminds them that there is no power that can challenge the Might of the Almighty, in whose presence all mankind shall be called to book where severe reckoning will await the tyrants.

Branding Pharaoh a tyrant is significant, in that the position he took vis-ā-vis Moses' invitation was dictated by big-headedness and despotism; it did not stem from a well-founded conviction because he was trying to make up for his precarious situation in proving his case against overwhelming evidence.

Here, the believer steps in, with his credible argument, decrying their plot to kill Moses for merely arguing, with conviction, his case in inviting them to believe in God.

He managed to avert the danger that was hanging over Moses' head, by persuading them that he did not pose any danger to them, as he did not have any military force. All he had was ideology. So, if he were a liar, he would face the consequences of his lying without any harm coming their way. Yet, if he was truthful, surely some harm might befall them. He then embarked on a campaign of psychological warfare, with a view to damaging their morale. By simply making comparisons between Pharaoh's material power and what Moses had described of the absolute power of God, he would instil fear in their hearts, because the two powers were disproportionate, and they would not stand a chance before the Almighty.

Pharaoh did not seem to hearken to this type of threat, preferring instead to fall back on the tactics of a ruler who gives the impression that he is in charge and issuing orders to the effect that he wanted them to see through his own eyes and that he would guide them aright. Thus, they should not listen to the narrative of the believer.

In resorting to this approach, Pharaoh was sure that no negative response would come his way from his people because, to his mind, the role of the followers was to listen and carry out the orders without

discussion. However, the believer had other ideas. He started warning them against the bleak end that was awaiting them as a result of their negative stand on what Moses had called them to. What he did was to remind them of bygone peoples who took the same position by oppressing and fighting the prophets who were sent to them, without giving them the chance to argue their case in a well- informed and free debate.

The believer then raised before his people the divine notion that condemned their arguing about the signs of God without evidence, merely because this was the way Pharaoh wanted it to be. His words fell on deaf ears. This would eventually subject them to God's wrath.

### Despotic sabre rattling

Pharaoh hit back, although indirectly, at the believer in an attempt to dismiss the idea of imminent danger that might befall them, which he was warning them against, when he explained the question of God as a reality.

Moses' reply concentrated on showing real interest in ascending to see the Lord of Moses to take issue with Him, as if he were a person like any other with whom he did battle. This was an attempt from Pharaoh to give the impression that he wanted to find out whether He was real or a figment of the mind. This was a stunt from Pharaoh in a bid to play on the consciences of his people. He wanted to put them under the illusion that he was capable of meeting with the Lord of Moses, by issuing orders to Haman to build him escalators towards the skies.

However, the believer among his people was ready to deal him another blow. That is, with a view to minimizing the effect of his tactics on the people, he raised his voice again without trying to hide the sense of bitterness and pity he felt for them. He started to give them good counsel, stressing the fact that this world would come to an end and that the eternal one is the hereafter. He then reminded them of the nature of responsibility and the consequences thereupon. That is, each person is going to be held responsible for the actions they have committed, be they good or bad. No one else is going to be burdened by another's responsibility. Moreover, Pharaoh would never be in a position to protect them from any punishment that might come their way.

At this stage of the dialogue, we can feel some sort of struggle looming in the horizon between the believer and his people. It seems that they

were trying to lure him away from that trend, i.e. the good he wanted for them, and instead pin him down to the way they were leading their lives, the hallmark of which was self-indulgence. Nevertheless, he stood his ground, explaining the difference between his invitation and theirs. Whereas he was inviting them to paradise, eternal prosperity and the success in this world and the hereafter, they did not seem to offer him anything in return. He concluded that there was no basis for their offer. Rather, they seemed to be desirous of sticking it out with the person [Pharaoh] who could not provide them with any guarantee for this life. Conversely, being with God would certainly mean all the good things, especially when man lives with dignity, which draws on that of the Almighty, with the peace of mind that God would give him.

The dialogue draws to an end after the believer comes to recognise that he has exhausted all means of persuasion. Nevertheless, he reminds them that they are going to remember all that he has explained to them when the realities of life come to challenge all their practices. Thus, he is resigned to the fact that his call has for the time being gone unheeded, as was the case with similar sincere calls of bygone days. But it would be remembered in due course.

In the end, he had to make it clear to them that he was washing his hands of them and leaving the matter to his Lord for He was capable of taking care of him in this world and the hereafter. The Holy Qur'an puts the final touches on the story, in that God responded to his plea by saving him from the evil deeds of his people. As for them, they would face the consequences of their deeds, ending in hellfire.

## Practical benefits

The reader must be aware that many lessons can be learned in our contemporary life:

### 1. Dissimulation, a Qur'anic principle

There is a need for people among the believers, who have already established a presence in some communities, without losing their identity and keeping to the right path, to carry on working in the way of God, with a view to winning people over to their cause. They should also acquaint themselves with the plans that might be hatched against the camp of belief and its followers. Any acquired knowledge in this field could be used to defeat those plots and pre-empt them.

This practice, which is known as dissimulation (*taqiyyah*), is part of the established Muslim Shia ideology that is derived from the Holy Qur'an, as in this story, the story of the famous companion of the Prophet (s.a.w.) Ammar bin Yasir and others.

Dissimulation (*taqiyyah*) is a universal human practice states. Groups and individuals, regardless of their principles and philosophies, resort to with a view to overcome certain pressures which could otherwise endanger their very existence.

Islam has allowed this practice in situations where one finds oneself in dire need, so much so that clinging outwardly to the line is no longer practically feasible. That said, Islam does not tolerate taking to dissimulation as a means to jumping over the principles it put in place. This is so as diluting the practice of dissimulation would lead, in many cases, to losing the principle and the objective as a result of generalizing the practice.

Doubtless to say that the idea of dissimulation reiterates the practicability and flexibility of Islam in man's movement in the face of challenges. Yet, whoever takes to dissimulation has to do this without losing sight of the overriding interests of both society and religion, in that they have to be the deciding factors in adapting dissimulation or forgetting about it in favour of forging ahead wih the challenge.

## 2. Indirect dialogue

It is advisable that the workers in the way of God keep abreast with the latest ideas that the rulers keep disseminating, which are intended to mislead the masses and justify their aggression and straying from the right path. However, the activists should seek to go about this without resorting to violent means. The dialogue between them and members of society should be conducted by proxy, as though it were conducted with the ruler, with the aim of guiding him aright and bringing him back from the brink to see sense again. There is no harm in instilling fear in the heart of the ruler, especially when the voices of dissent become more vociferous in criticising his practices, leaving him with no room to hit back at them, or silence them.

## 3. The spirit of faith

Muslim activists have to follow the example of that true believer, especially the strength of feelings and innermost serenity, which seemed

to have dictated his every move, above all his ability to engage in meaningful dialogue, in the course of calling to the way of God, and emerging victorious. A most striking feature of that man's demeanour was his determination to shun the limelight, in that he never publicly claimed that he was a sympathizer with Moses. He maintained his wise low key encounters to the end. He had to take that position out of conviction that it was in the best interest of the cause of Moses, i.e. by not openly taking sides.

### 4. A necessary challenge

It is important to espouse the moralistic approach, by reminding people of God and the outcome on the Day of Judgement. This should be the case across the board, i.e. even with the tyrants and insolent people, as a way of countering their perception of their own power. It should be made clear to them that no matter how powerful they may think themselves, their power does not stand a chance before the Might of the Omnipotent. The efforts should aim to create a chasm between the tyrants and the people, on account of linking the question of right and wrong with man's destiny. This is bound to create a feeling of keeping oneself out of harm's way.

### 5. Drawing the lines

It is necessary to try hard to define the boundaries between the call to the way of God and the call to some other way. By carefully outlining the features of each of the two ways and putting the case for the way of God plainly across –that it is the only safe way to reach happiness in this world and the hereafter, and that following the crooked ways will lead to loss – is capable of yielding good results. This truth has come across abundantly clear in the believer's last ditch appeal, when he emphatically reiterated that his call would lead to safety and that his people's unpleasant ways would certainly lead to hellfire.

It is incumbent on Muslim activists to face up to ideological, social, political, and economic trends that aim at adversely influencing the masses. By exposing the true faces of these trends, they should be able to heighten awareness among the masses to be on their guard so as not to fall under their sway. Such trends may divert the masses away from the right path by confusing truth with falsehood or trying to market the latter under the guise of truth. This is true of the attempts by certain political and economic movements to exploit some social problems and

exaggerate them, with a view to neutralizing other fundamental factors, simply to imply that those have nothing to do with matters of destiny. That is, they try to mislead people that the idea of destiny is a purely mundane one and that it has no bearing whatsoever on the question of the hereafter and belief in God.

### 6. The environment and man's freedom

The story of the believer among the people of the Pharaoh unequivocally lends resounding support to the Islamic notion that rejects the assertion that the environment has a decisive say in constricting man's free will. In so arguing, the proponents seek to justify the trend of going astray and the kind of self-fulfilled prophecy that emanates from a philosophical ideology that denies man's freedom. They blame this on the environment, which, they maintain, can contribute to shaping man's way of thinking and influencing his choices, be they straightforward or devious.

The existence of such a person [the believer among the Pharaohs], who was born in an evil society, or like the wife of Pharaoh, who lived under the shackles of that society, might lend support to the notion that the climate of evil can provide the motivation to evil-doing. Yet, while it might weaken resistance to falling prey to its temptations, it can by no means do away with it. Therefore, there remains for man, despite all the odds, that margin to exercise his free will that could increase his chances of winning.

However, it is equally true that a person who is born or raised in a good environment might not emerge to be good. Examples of such people can be found in Noah's wife and son and Lot's wife, who were in good company, yet it did not prevent them from going astray as a result of falling prey to the temptations of the wider society they lived in.

In fact, the environment cannot face man with an impossible task of breaking free from the general conduct and practices of his society. The environment could make it difficult, but not impossible, for man to get rid of its yoke by sheer perseverance, determination and unflinching will.

This is what keeps the spirits of the workers in the way of God high and strong, in the face of all the extreme pressures exerted by the environment, in order to push the process of change forward, even though the environment might play a part in enticing man away from his morals and convictions.

## "Then there came running, from the farthest part of the city, a man"

This is the story of another believer who chose not to join his people in the way of unbelief, misguidance, and animosity to the prophets and messengers. Instead, he decided to walk the right path that led him to belief and guidance, where he spared no effort in supporting the Message of God by word and deed, not least by trying all ways possible to persuade his people to see sense and follow what the messengers of God called for.

The Holy Qur'an tells his story in the context of the three messengers who were sent to the "Companions [people] of the City" to call them to God and the upholding of His messages. The messengers were met with hostility, threats, and rejection, so much so that not even a single soul was won over. There came bolt from the blue; a man came running from the farthest part of the city, to raise a voice in a last ditch effort to persuade his people to follow the three messengers:

> **Set forth to them, by way of a parable, the (story of) the Companions of the City. Behold! There came apostles to it. When We (first) sent to them two apostles, they rejected them: But We strengthened them with a third: they said, "Truly, we have been sent on a mission to you". The (people) said: "Ye are only men like ourselves; and (God) Most Gracious sends no sort of revelation: ye do nothing but lie". They said: "Our Lord doth know that we have been sent on a mission to you. And our duty is only to proclaim the clear Message". The (people) said: "For us, we augur an evil omen from you: if ye desist not, we will certainly stone you. And a grievous punishment indeed will be inflicted on you by us". They said: "Your evil omens are with yourselves: (deem ye this an evil omen). If ye are admonished! Nay, but ye are a people transgressing all bounds!"**
>
> **Then there came running, from the farthest part of the City, a man, saying, "O my people! Obey the apostles: Obey those who ask no reward of you (for themselves), and who have themselves received**

**Guidance. It would not be reasonable in me if I did not serve Him Who created me, and to Whom ye shall (all) be brought back. Shall I take (other) gods besides Him? If (God) Most Gracious should intend some adversity for me, of no use whatever will be their intercession for me, nor can they deliver me. I would indeed, if I were to do so, be in manifest error. For me, I have faith in the Lord of you (all): listen, then, to me!" It was said: "Enter thou the Garden". He said: "Ah me! Would that my people knew (what I know)! – For that my Lord has granted me forgiveness and has enrolled me among those held in honour!" And We sent not down against his people, after him, any hosts from heaven, nor was it needful for Us so to do. It was no more than a single mighty blast, and behold! They were (like ashes) quenched and silent.** [36:13–29]

The story consists of three chapters with a three-dimensional dialogue, i.e. between the messengers and the people of the city, the believer and his people, and the believer and the angels. The three dialogues are parts of a trilogy.

## The mission of the messengers

Those messengers came in two groups; two in the first batch and then the third one joined them to lend them support. On arrival, they announced that God had sent them to the people. However, it seems that they were not prophets but emissaries of Jesus (a.s.), as is evident from the traditions. The reaction of the people they were sent to was typical of bygone people of unbelief, i.e. in their rejection of the messages and the messengers because being a member of the human race and a prophet at the same time was incomprehensible. The apostles made it clear to the people that they did not want to engage them in dialogue regarding their mission, simply because they did not have time to waste. The apostles, however, further clarified the position by saying that they were very clear about their mission, had confidence in themselves, and knew that God had sent them to the people of that town. That is, their mission was to convey the message to the people; whoever wanted to arrive at a conviction, they were there to help them get to it. Conversely, whoever did not wish to follow this path, they were not ready to engage them in a futile dialogue. It sufficed them that they showed the people the evidence that God had sent, so that they should not have any pretext that they were not shown clear proofs.

However, the people did not like that rational and calm answer that was symptomatic of the position of the message, which had confidence in itself, and which moved assuredly guided by belief. The people's plan was aimed at complicating matters for the emissaries, leading them to tense situations where feelings might have run high and the patience might have snapped under pressure. This could have made the apostles behave in a wrong way. Without doubt, this would have led them down a path that would not serve the message in any way, if not endanger it in the longer run. The situation had taken a turn to the worse, in that the people started threatening the apostles with stoning, if they did not desist from going ahead with their mission. They also branded them prophets of doom. Nevertheless, the answer came calm and collected, in that they were not the ones who had come up with the evil. On the contrary, unbelief and misguidance, which were the hallmark of the unbelievers and the misguided ones, were the source of all the wickedness. That is, their intransigence was driving them to plug their ears, so as not to hear the reminder. It was also causing them to be overindulgent in rebellion and to go astray from the right path.

### Rising of the truth

This scene draws to a close to make way for another chapter in the story, featuring the one-man band of belief standing with his people urging them to support the apostles and follow them. He called upon his people to ponder the issue on account of the naked truth, in that the apostles had no axe to grind. To them, it was all alike whether the people remained hanging to the rope of unbelief or moved over to the camp of belief. That was borne by fact that they did not ask for any remuneration for their work, which was, in itself, further evidence that the whole matter was that of a desire to guide the people aright, and that they had no personal gain to contemplate.

The believer then started conducting a dialogue with himself, making sure that his people were in full view of what he was doing. His intention was to make them reflect on what he was saying and that he was inviting them to what he had believed in. He further desired that they move away from the argument about the truthfulness of the claim of the apostles, or lack of it, to the issue of reflecting on the idea itself and eventually rejecting or accepting it. It is noteworthy that this is the Qur'anic approach to debating the matter of theism and polytheism. The way to

discuss the matter is by way of comparison between the Divine attributes and the merits of the partners the polytheists allege God has. The whole exercise was intended to lead to the conclusion, by the believer, that his abiding by the camp of polytheism would lead him to the way of misguidance. Thus, he did not want to be counted on the side of the polytheists, proclaiming instead his belief in God and rejecting polytheism. In the end, he did not forget to appeal to others' consciences to take note of his outcry.

## Purity of the believer

The curtain draws on the final scene, in tandem with the closing of the final chapter of the whole world. That mass ending would spell the end for all arguments and messages. The part of bearing the responsibility would have come to an end, only to open the door to reckoning and the subsequent facing of the consequences. The entirety of humanity, the prophets, the tyrants and their followers, would stand before God to be tried for the good or bad they have done, and would either be rewarded or punished as the case may be. God shall forgive whosoever He wished and punish whomsoever He wished because all matters shall be His.

There and then the believer, who had followed the truth, would stand alone, facing the community of unbelief. He would be asked to enter paradise in reward for his belief and work. However, he would pause a little while to remember his people who seemed to have forgotten about ever facing that situation, despite the fact that the messengers warned them against it and gave them good news about the outcome resulting from joining the camp of belief. The believer would feel utter solitude for he would have wished that his people had realized that beforehand, so that they would have ended up earning the bliss and favour of God. Yet, it would not be the case.

One can deduce from these verses that the believers live continually with the nice feeling and desire that others would share with them the reward they had achieved and the good that had come their way. Once God had given them their due share of the reward, they would feel the anguish for their people for not getting a share of that great reward.

So, the final chapter of the story is closed with the bleak outcome that had befallen the people, for they had got the punishment they deserved for their works, proving that they were so insignificant that they could not put up a fight:

**It was no more than a single mighty blast, and behold! They were (like ashes) quenched and silent.** [36:29].

This story has something in common with the previous one, of the believer among the people of the Pharaohs, in that both the heroes seem to be calm and collected in the face of the challenges mounted against the messages and the messengers. The messengers and activists seemed to go about their missions showing self-restraint in adversity. The high spirit and zeal demonstrated by the new believers reveal a sense of responsibility in their work in the way of God, using all means at their disposal: showing support to the leadership, entrusted with delivering the message, and joining forces with it when matters came to loggerheads. In all that, they showed flexibility or steadfastness, as the position might have dictated. Last, but not least, they showed sincere feelings of sympathy and love for others. Their sense of responsibility is tinged with a human touch in order to make sure good, mercy, and blessings shine in the lives of people. This feeling of common good for all follows the true believers to the final abode, in that they do not seem to be really relishing the reward of paradise because others will not be enjoying the same happy ending, simply because the unbelievers did not follow the right path in this world.

This is the approach that the activists need at all times and places, so that propagating the message would not turn into a routine pointless exercise. This should be an eye-opener for the activist in order that his personal feelings should not be mixed up with those of the message, leading to a tendency of not being accommodating. That is, he should show tolerance for others, without entertaining the idea that they are a nuisance and intent on spoiling his comfort, as this is bound to reflect badly on his stand vis-ä-vis the message, so much so that he might contemplate abandoning it and abdicating his responsibility. This may be the catalyst for taking it out on others, just to satisfy his own ego and desires.

The approach of the believer draws on that of Prophet Abraham (a.s.) when he was reasoning with his people and questioning their beliefs, viz. of worshipping the sun, the moon and the stars. He used to engage in soliloquy as to the viability of this kind of worship. He was ensuring that his people observed what he was doing and listened to what he was saying, with a view to making them understand the question of right and wrong. He was doing that without letting his personal feelings take hold

over the matter, in that he was talking about those ideas as one of them, and not as an enemy bent on attacking their beliefs. This would provide them with the opportunity to reflect on the ideas and embark on a soul-searching exercise, after they had listened to his soliloquy.

This approach has been reiterated in many verses, most probably for its importance in the field of propagating the way of God as a method to be followed by Muslim activists in their work and encounters. We have already discussed this approach at length in this book.

Before concluding this chapter, we have to draw attention to the tactics of the unbelievers in standing against the apostles and dubbing them prophets of doom. They seemed to have taken this position as a pretext to reject the message the apostles came to deliver to them. In this, there is clear evidence that they did not have the flimsiest idea or proof to reason with the messengers. That is why they resorted to vain talk and dabbling in trivialities, which they themselves did not appear to believe in, to justify their intransigence and sticking to their position of unbelief. Using the same ploy, they looked as though they had stirred up trouble for the messengers by inciting the people that they were the source of all afflictions that had befallen them.

However, the messengers had always hit back decisively, especially by attributing all ills and problems to the unbelievers and that they were all of their own making, due to their own practices that were induced by unbelief and rejection. Therefore, it was they, and not the messengers, who should be held responsible for all the problems and mishaps. The messengers' noble missions were to redeem them from the misery and the torment they were experiencing.

## What is in it for us?

We should espouse this approach in facing up to the methods of the groups of unbelief and misguidance that are tirelessly waging war against the groups of Islamic belief. That is, the adversaries of Islam do their utmost to charge its true followers with all the responsibility for some of the social ills. This attitude is bound to reflect on the issues of struggle and position taking. They never tire of creating unfavourable climates against it, above all by waging misinformation campaigns that aim to discredit the believers, in that they were to blame for all the quandaries and misfortunes.

As for the nature of struggle, it should identify the reasons behind those ills and troubles and trace them back to the malpractices of the camp of misguidance. That is, they are the natural products of devious ideas and stray footsteps, which do not care about the public interest because they are governed by individualistic motives and personal inclinations. A second stage could be making clear the Islamic principles and the initiatives of the activists, explaining what good they have in store for the entire society, and reiterating the fact of avoiding anything that could prove detrimental or corruptive to society because its overriding concern is the interest of man. Thus, it cannot contemplate anything that could put man in harm's way.

However, there seems to be a problem of biased media, which exploit the ignorance of the masses of the real reasons behind the events to interpret them at will and wage a smear campaign against the camp of belief without any basis and for no crime it has committed. It is expected, however, that the believers should hit back at their adversaries in order to set the record right, without losing sight of the intellectual and emotional state of the masses, because this has a bearing on achieving the goal.

## Optimists versus Pessimism

**"When some of them said: 'Why do ye preach to a people whom Allah will destroy or visit with a terrible punishment?' Said the preachers: 'To discharge our duty to your Lord and perchance they may fear Him'". [7:164].**

### The reformists should not give in to hopelessness

In this terse holy verse, a dialogue is being conducted between two types of people on the question of how to deal with some people, who overindulge, both in word and deed, in going astray. They have gone so far off the mark that some activists believe that it is useless to try to bring them back to the right path, the way of God.

Nevertheless, other workers in the way of God take a different position on this type of phenomenon, in that they do not give up easily on people, feeling a sense of divine duty and responsibility to let the ingredients of good play their part amidst the piles of evil that have accumulated over the years, forming barriers to reformist work. Thus, those activists do their best to win those lost people over and bring them back to the fold of belief and guidance, using the carrot and the stick, in the hope that their inner inhibitions give way and, instead, be receptive to the call of good, after the right conditions have been created in the external environment.

According to those activists, there should always be hope in life, so that it stays vibrant and does not wither away on the way of death. In darkness, the hope for a glimmer of light should remain alive by the presence of the glittering stars and the moon. In some other ways, also remains the hope of light at the end of the tunnel by the impending dawn of a new day. In the darkness of doubt, which may find room in the minds of some people to cling to, there is always the hope that the firm steps of certitude and light are nigh to dispel the darkness and bring in peace of mind and tranquillity.

In the absence of misguidance, guidance is always at hand to provide most needed comfort and light, in the same way water gushes forth from the spring to form waterfalls. All that makes the hope in good guidance

and light a reality among life's other realities, manifesting itself in more than one aspect.

Guided by the steps of hope and realism the activists and reformists move around to fulfil the major tasks, lifting their heads high with their sight focused on the summits, regardless of the barriers and hitches the climbers to the peak of the mountain might encounter.

However, should the case for the lost ones be that of the spiritual and psychological gulf they have created, or the bridges they have blown up, there seems to be no link left to cross over, from the bank of this world, where they wander about blindly, to the other bank, i.e. that of the hereafter, where God would shower His servants with favours, forgiveness, and pleasure.

Yet, if the issue is that of their relationship with God, the matter is quite straightforward because He has built bridges for those of His servants who have gone astray, but want to rejoin the right path in genuine penitence at any time. God has made this abundantly clear in many Qur'anic verses, especially when He calls upon the sinners to come back to Him, regardless of the distance they may have covered on the crooked way. He is very close to them, listening to their prayers and supplications at all times:

> **When My servants ask thee concerning Me, I am indeed close (to them): I listen to the prayer of every suppliant when he calleth on Me: Let them also, with a will, listen to My call, and believe in Me: that they may walk in the right way.** [2:186]

> **Say: "O my Servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of God: for God forgives all sins: for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful".** [30:53]

For the workers in the cause of God, this is the springboard of hope in the procession of life. They keep working hard to persuade the sinners and those who have gone astray to rejoin the way to God. The philosophy of hope reflects the nature of things in life on the one hand. On the other hand, it connects with the generous mercy of God. It is incumbent on the activists to understand that the aims of their work should not be confined only to seeing tangible results. Rather, the work is characterized by a comprehensive approach, whose very important ingredients include discharging one's duty to their Lord and warning transgressors to be mindful of God's punishment, perchance they may fear Him.

## The difference between two outlooks

In this swift and dense dialogue, the Qur'anic verse has aimed to suggest to us that we should keep working because it is the way to God and to living a meaningful life. There is no room for the fainthearted, the hopeless, and the capitulator. This breed of people usually run after the pitch of darkness within the light of the truth to try to lend support to their calls of surrender. They should, instead, look for the silver lining in the dark clouds, so that they may instil optimism in the hearts of the pessimists and give hope to, and infuse peace in, the lives of the panicky and the desperate.

Thus, the dissimilarity between the characters, i.e. the optimist and the pessimist, is self-evident. The first one maps its steps in life by mustering all its capabilities and drawing on all its energy reserves to put all at the service of planting new areas with real hope. And once the sowing of seeds takes root and the nurturing of plantation comes to fruition, the proof shall be manifested in the harvest. In the process of work, every effort should be made to avoid any superficial experiment, which should, by nature, not cost man more than paying lip service to the status quo that may hide more than what is on the surface.

The second personality seems to be in a hurry, preferring to deal with the issues speedily, giving way to considering outward manifestations that may not give real grounds for hope. This is bound to make such people give up hope easily and give in to hopelessness as a rationalization for running away from real life situations.

It is the difference between those who become captivated by outward appearances, living on the peripheries of life, and those who look deeper behind the facäde, gaining in confidence and strength as they go, and filling life with fertility and vibrancy.

In this verse, as is the case with others, we experience the Qur'anic climate that is pulsating with life. It is the picture of life, where, although the canvas of the portrait does not seem to have room for more shades of colour, the underling current makes it rich with pure and vivid connotations that overflow with love, life, intensity and peace.

# "There is the type of man whose speech about this world's life may dazzle thee"

## Types of hypocrites

This is another example of man representing political hypocrisy that is found at all times and places. These types of politicians never tire of playing on people's sentiments, fears and weaknesses in order to win their support. They seem to be appealing to people by announcing programmes for reforms ostensibly to better people's lives, making endless promises, and giving fiery and emotive speeches. Also, they do not seem to shy away from trying to instil confidence in the hearts of people by giving pledges and calling on God to be their witness, which are, in fact, smokescreens. They do all this in order to win the masses over to their side against their opponents on the way to assuming power. They appeal to the masses to give them the chance to put their promised comprehensive reformist programme to the test. For their part, the masses oblige in the hope that the promise-makers may deliver them from the yoke of oppression, the misery of life, the darkness of ignorance and the bitterness of poverty.

The misleading plans of this type of people may attain success, so much so that they ascend to power where they become the captains of the nation's fortunes. Yet, no sooner have those people seen themselves catapulted to power, they reveal their true identity and plans. Thus, they do not seem to waste any time in sowing corruption in the land and destroying the civilization of mankind, contrary to God's ordinances. God loves good and doing good and loathes mischief and spreading it.

Some of those who supported the newcomer to power, see it as their duty to remind him of his promises and warn him against God's wrath and punishment, advising him to fear God for what he is practising against His servants and land, and plead with him to see sense. They engage him in debate, with a view to persuading him to desist from his malpractices. But, he rejects their pleas and good counsel, criticizing those well-intentioned people for daring to give him counsel because he

does not recognize that he could be accident-prone, believing that he is infallible, that his rule is just, and that his conduct is in the right track. Thus, he carries on with his self-righteousness, staying subservient to his intrinsic inclinations, disobeying his Lord's injunctions, and happy with the sins he is committing in word and deed.

This is the true picture of this type of people, who never tire of putting on different guises to serve their own ends. On one occasion you see them wearing the mantle of religion. On another occasion, you see them assuming the appearance of politicians. At other times, you see them clothed in the gear of sociologists and economists. These are nothing but veneers of deceit, fraud, and treachery. In a nutshell: hypocrites. And this is how the Holy Qur'an portrays this group:

> **There is the type of man whose speech about this world's life may dazzle thee, and he calls God to witness about what is in his heart; yet is he the most contentious of enemies. When he turns his back, his aim everywhere is to spread mischief through the earth and destroy crops and cattle. But God loveth not mischief. When it is said to him, "Fear God", he is led by arrogance to (more) crime. Enough for him is Hell; An evil bed indeed (to lie on)!** [2:204–05]

The moral behind the portrayal of this type of people lies in uncovering their true faces, and making the masses guard against falling prey to their long-winded promises. Instead, they should rely on considering the history and practices of the person, the party, or the group as the criteria for judging their truthfulness, or otherwise. This can make society impervious to the influences of the tactics that might manipulate people's emotions. This would make society sail its ship on an even keel and eventually dock it on safe shores.

## Appearances versus inner meanings

In the Holy Qur'an, it is commonplace to encounter human examples whose appearances belie their inner realities. This is intended to provide us with the necessary insight into decisive positions when those people are put to the test in real life situations. In other words, Muslims should seek to harmonize their convictions with their practical positions, away from any naive treatment of complex issues, since real judgement in matters can be arrived at after delving deep into those complex issues where the deepest and most well-defined features can be found.

This is how the Holy Qur'an portrays this type of people:

> **There are among men some who serve God, as it were, on the verge: if good befalls them, they are, therewith, well content; but if a trial comes to them, they turn on their faces: they lose both this world and the Hereafter: that is loss for all to see! [22:11].**

This is the picture of a person who is lulled into a sense of spiritual security so long as it does not cost them anything in comfort, wealth, or privileges, and as long as they are sitting on the fence, living a spiritual life without any challenges. However, once they are afflicted with any type of mishap, be it in their prosperity, offspring, or desires, they lose their equilibrium, so much so that they tumble over and get confused and bewildered. They soon find themselves at a loss at not being able to separate the wheat from the chaff. They do not seem to have a strong base of belief and good work to fall back on, so that they might be able to achieve God's pleasure and His reward in the hereafter. Thus, they lose both this world and the hereafter, and that is a manifest loss!

Some dissimilarity between the two pictures might also be detected in other respects. In the first one, deception can be read in the slogan that is being hoisted, which is aimed at cheating others, in that although it has the semblance of good, yet the bitter reality soon appears in practice. In the second picture, the deception emerges in the process of carrying out the work, which is devoid of any experience. Then, the picture becomes clearer after facing the bitter experience, when man comes face to face with the real challenges. However, both the pictures are similar in nature, in that they lead man not to give in to appearances. Rather, he should examine them with a critical mind and look at them with a watchful vision, aspiring to delve into the depth of the picture in order to discern its true features and what lies behind the façade.

# *Chapter VIII*

# Qur'anic Storytelling in Dialogue (3)

## Satan in the Qur'an

The Holy Qur'an has talked about *Iblis* (Satan) as a physical being made of fire. He is portrayed as a rebellious creature, basking in glory of the matter he was made of and showing arrogance to man, who was made of clay. To Satan's mind, fire is far superior to clay because it can destroy clay with its power. The cause of his rebellion against God was the high regard in which God had held Adam when He created him and for his forthcoming role on earth, especially when God ordered the angels to prostrate themselves to Adam. As the Qur'an implies, Satan was part of the angelic group.

The Qur'an keeps showing pictures that depict the dialogue with Satan to make clear the grudge this creature holds against man. He asked God to grant him immortal status in this life, so that he could concentrate on his vendetta against man. In so doing, he wants to topple man from the lofty station God had put him in and rouse in him the struggle between good and evil. He spares no effort in tempting man to incline towards doing what would in the end spell disaster for his being, by dampening down man's spirit and his position vis-ä-vis God.

Through the dialogue, the Holy Qur'an informs us that God had granted Satan his wish for the reasons He knows best. Nevertheless, He has made it abundantly clear to him and us that his power does not go beyond luring us towards committing what is vile and showing disobedience. There is, by no means, any direct authority that could entail force, coercion, and repression that Satan can exercise on man. Indeed, it is the type of man who chooses to embark on unbelief, waywardness, trampling his faith and not experiencing a sense of enmity to Satan, who gives Satan the sway over himself. In contrast, the person who chooses the path of belief does not usually give Satan any chance to manipulate him because of the strength of his belief. Thus, Satan's plans to mislead such a person are doomed to failure. The Qur'anic dialogue

has sought to capture all that, highlighting the general characteristics of Satan.

## Satan's role in the story of Adam's creation

God created Satan and honoured and favoured him over many of his creatures. This regard with which Satan was held started when He ordered the angels, Satan included, to bow down to Adam in a big celebration that was held as a sign of glorification for the new creature on account of his intrinsic characteristics, the great role that awaited him in representing God on earth, and putting all creation at his service in order to play his part in the most efficient manner.

In many verses, the Holy Qur'an mentions the characteristics of Satan. By and large, he is portrayed as an insignificant creature who is at odds with God, especially in the great issues. He is painted as an egoistic self-centred and arrogant person, not least for his high opinion of his physical makeup being superior to others. Satan does not seem to give genuine thought to the other characteristics that, if found in others, could make them far superior, namely the spiritual, intellectual, and behavioural. These are the qualities that make man strive to reach the highest stations while competing for a better future, through sound ideology and better work.

The Qur'anic verses assume different approaches to present the whole picture in scenes that seem pulsating with life, movement and liveliness, with the aim of making the gulf between man and Satan far greater on the one hand. On the other hand, importance is given to the sense of the terribleness of arrogance and indulgence in self-worth and the extent to which it can influence the lives of living beings, as happened to Satan.

Here are some of the Qur'anic verses that make the boundaries of the portrait more defined:

> **And behold, We said to the angels: "Bow down to Adam" and they bowed down. Not so *Iblis* (Satan): he refused and was haughty: he was of those who reject Faith.** [2:34]
>
> **It is We Who created you and gave you shape; then We bade the angels bow down to Adam, and they bowed down; not so Iblis; He refused to be of those who bow down. (God) said: "What prevented thee from bowing down when I commanded thee?" He said: "I am better than he: Thou didst create me from fire, and him from clay".**

**(God) said: "Get thee down from this: it is not for thee to be arrogant here: get out, for thou art of the meanest (of creatures)". [7:11–13]**

**Behold! We said to the angels: "Prostrate unto Adam": They prostrated except Iblis (Satan): He said, "Shall I prostrate to one whom Thou didst create from clay?" He said: "Seest Thou? This is the one whom Thou hast honoured above me! If Thou wilt but respite me to the Day of Judgment, I will surely bring his descendants under my sway – all but a few!" [17:61–62]**

Going through these verses would suffice to draw a clear picture of Satan's character. It is that of an arrogant creature that thinks highly of his physical fibre, so much so that he rebels against the will of God when he perceives that it clashes with the intrinsic conceited tendency of his character. Not only this, he seems bent on facing the consequences of his rebellion and not bothering about his fate, only to keep his "pride".

### The tragedy of Satan, a delusion

Some philosophists have tried to describe Satan's position vis-ä-vis his belief as tragic. They seem to portray him as a true monotheist and believer, who refused to bow down to Adam out of a desire to worship God alone, i.e. no one should prostrate to any one else but God. He has been depicted as willing to rebel against God's command and tolerate His punishment, for the sheer love for, and truthfulness of belief in, Him. However, this argument does not seem to have any basis, neither in religion nor in logic, for two reasons:

1. The idea of Satan as a living being is not one that can be subjected to the empirical approach, so that we can have access to its details through our personal experiences. It is a matter of the unseen, which we have come to know about from God through what he revealed to His prophets. In this context, we have to countenance its features and details from the body of religious traditions, especially God's divine revelations. As is evident from the above-mentioned verses, Satan's refusal to prostrate himself to Adam was not induced by monotheism and love for God; rather, it was due to arrogance. We shall see in the ensuing discussion how he has a begrudging character, whose resentment knows no bounds, so much so that he spares no effort to inflict damage on the new creature and his offspring, as a means for venting his hate. And in order to achieve that evil end, he pleaded with God to let him live until the Day of Judgement. If this is the picture of Satan depicted in the Holy

Qur'an, from where did those philosophasters bring us the portrait of the true believer and lover of God Satan had been, to the extent that he is prepared to be consumed by fire simply to keep pure his love for God and belief in Him? Can we not but consider this a figment of the imagination of a poet? A poet who is day-dreaming and trying to confer the semblance of tragedy on criminals, by virtue of identifying with their feelings, without giving measured thought to the real motives of the crime and its consequences on the land and people. A similar case is he who condemns the death penalty meted out to a murderer, [as a punishment in the Islamic penal code], on the basis of naive emotional feelings, losing sight of the conscious planning of legislation for man's life. We may find some other details pertaining to this subject in the traditions of the Progeny of the Prophet (a.s.).

In Biharul Anwar, [a compendium of traditions (*hadith*)], and in the context of the stories of the prophets, Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.) was quoted as saying, ***"Satan was ordered to bow down to Adam. He replied: O Lord! If You forgive me for not prostrating to him, I would worship You the kind of worship that no one else could match. God Almighty said: I wish to be obeyed whence I have decreed"***[1].

Some traditions from the Progeny of the Prophet (a.s.) spoke about this in a similar vein..

Abu Basira asked Imam as-Sadiq (a.s.), ***"Did the angels perform the prostrating act by putting their foreheads on the earth? He said: Yes, as a mark of glory to God Almighty"***[2].

In the tradition (*hadith*) of the protestation (*ihtijaj*), in the context of a dialogue with a Jew, Imam Ali (a.s.) has been quoted as saying, ***"Their [the angels] prostration was not out of submission. They worshipped Adam to the exclusion of God, the Most High. However, it was out of recognition for Adam's loftier station and by way of asking mercy for him"***[3].

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[1]Ibid. vol. 1, p. 136.
[2]From *at-Tabatabie, al-Mizan fi Tafseeril* Qur'an, vol. 1, p. 135–36].
[3]Ibid.

## Satan's Role vis-ä-vis Man

What is Satan's role vis-ä-vis man? Does Satan have overwhelming power over man, so much so that the latter cannot walk the path of submission to and harmony with the will of God?

If this is the case, how can one understand this "God-given" domineering power? And how can one reconcile this with God's Justice? The God who threatens man with punishment, if he rebelled against His commands, while making it possible for Satan to lure him away from the right path?

This could be the impression that is predominant among the generality of people, as a way of blaming Satan for many of the ills they are afflicted with and for being noncommittal. Thus, they find in Satan a whipping boy, i.e., to their mind, their going astray is a natural result of falling to Satan's devices. However, the Holy Qur'an paints a different picture.

Satan has no power to exert on man, apart from trying to mislead him by way of devilish insinuations and creating tempting conditions for man to commit what is vile.

Man, on the other hand, has been endowed with conscious intellect that can draw the line between good and evil and be clear on the Divine messages, which open up all the roads to acquire the necessary knowledge to lead to God's way. Man has also been graced with a strong will that helps in the process of sound decision-making and walking with firm steps on the right path.

This is what makes the struggle between man and Satan an equal one. In this fight, man has the free will to make choices amidst evil inclinations, tempting climates, and devilish suggestions. Yet, he has the means, of willpower, intellect, and conviction, to emerge victorious from this stand-off, without giving in to factors of weakness or failure.

In portraying the character of Satan and his part in misleading man, the Holy Qur'an has provoked in the mind of the believers the strength of conviction that is capable of defeating all the forces of evil, especially with the weapons of mental power and strong belief, should he use them

in the struggle. As for those who fall victim to his temptations, their failure is not due to intrinsic weakness but rather, because they contributed to paralysing, and eventually neutralizing, the powers at their disposal.

In this light, we should now know that lengthening Satan's life till the Day of Judgement, and giving him the freedom to seduce man, who is armed with all the weapons necessary to put up a determined fight, into leaving the right way is a sign of confidence in man. This is so that man should be able to choose his destiny on account of his will and capability, not because of coercion and repression that could weaken his resolve and make him buckle under pressure. This is the difference between one who gets influenced by events and falls under their sway, and one who is the master of his own destiny and who makes the events subservient to his willpower and choice.

Now, let us dwell for a short while on these Qur'anic verses, which tell of the roles of both man and Satan:

> **(The Pagans), leaving Him, call but upon female deities: They call but upon Satan the persistent rebel! God did curse him, but he said: "I will take of Thy servants a portion marked off; I will mislead them, and I will create in them false desires; I will order them to slit the ears of cattle, and to deface the (fair) nature created by God". Whoever, forsaking God, takes Satan for a friend, hath of a surety suffered a loss that is manifest. Satan makes them promises, and creates in them false desires; but Satan's promises are nothing but deception.** [4:117–20)

> **He said, "Seest Thou? This is the one whom Thou hast honoured above me! If Thou wilt but respite me to the Day of Judgement, I will surely bring his descendants under my sway – All but a few!" (God) said: "Go thy way; if any of them follow thee, verily Hell will be the recompense of you (all) – an ample recompense. And arouse those whom thou canst among them, with thy (seductive) voice; make assaults on them with thy cavalry and thy infantry; mutually share with them wealth and children; and make promises to them. But Satan promises them nothing but deceit. As for My servants, no authority shalt thou have over them: Enough is thy Lord for a Disposer of affairs".** [17:62–65]

> **(Iblis/Satan) said: "O my Lord! Give me then respite till the Day the**

**(dead) are raised". (God) said: "Respite is granted thee till the Day of the Time appointed". (Iblis) said: "O my Lord! Because Thou hast put me in the wrong, I will make (wrong) fair-seeming to them on the earth, and I will put them all in the wrong, Except Thy servants among them, sincere and purified (by Thy Grace)". (God) said: "This (way of My sincere servants) is indeed a way that leads straight to Me. For over My servants no authority shalt thou have, except such as put themselves in the wrong and follow thee". [15:36–42]**

**He said: "Because thou hast thrown me out of the way, lo! I will lie in wait for them on thy straight way: Then will I assault them from before them and behind them, from their right and their left: Nor wilt thou find, in most of them, gratitude (for thy mercies)". (God) said: "Get out from this, disgraced and expelled. If any of them follow thee – Hell will I fill with you all". [7:16–18]**

**And Satan will say when the matter is decided: "It was God Who gave you a promise of Truth: I too promised, but I failed in my promise to you. I had no authority over you except to call you but ye listened to me: then reproach not me, but reproach your own souls. I cannot listen to your cries, nor can ye listen to mine. I reject your former act in associating me with God. For wrong-doers there must be a grievous penalty". [14:22]**

## The boundaries of Satan's "authority"

It can be gathered from the verses above that, in his argument with God, Satan seems determined to entice Adam's offspring away from the right path, by lying in wait for them at every corner and tempting them with false promises of impending good, if they turn their backs to God. However, God granted Satan his wish, but warned him against indulging in his dreams and posturing, in that he did not have any direct power to mislead people. That is, he cannot mislead those who strive in the way of guidance. It is not in his power to tempt those who aim for forthrightness and good works, and get to them. All that Satan can do is arouse doubts in people's minds. Thus, those who are overwhelmed by wishful thinking may fall prey to his lure and follow him without any resistance.

Satan makes no bones about leading people astray. On the Day of Judgement, he openly confesses before those who were ensnared by his guile. He abdicates his responsibility in misleading the people who followed him by proclaiming that his role was confined to tempting them

with wicked suggestions, i.e. he did not have access to their mental faculties so that he could adversely affect their willpower and freedom of choice.

It is evident that the issue is not one of deviating from the path of justice in creating man and directing his steps, in that it is within its natural environment, i.e. as God has willed. That is, it is a means of rousing struggle within man's psyche, so that he is in a position to choose his way by exercising his free will, not by means of compulsion and suppression. This is what the following verses are trying to illustrate:

> **And on them did Satan prove true his idea, and they followed him, all but a party that believed. But he had no authority over them, except that We might test the man who believes in the Hereafter from him who is in doubt concerning it: and thy Lord doth watch over all things.** [34:20–21].

However, the picture becomes sharper when one consults other Qur'anic verses, which seek to rouse man and call on him to be unequivocally hostile to Satan. The verses also seek to show man the way to be the master of his own destiny, ignoring Satan's temptations, such as:

> **When thou dost read the Qur'an, seek God's protection from Satan the rejected one. No authority has he over those who believe and put their trust in their Lord. His authority is over those only, who take him as patron and who join partners with God.** [16:98–100)
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> **Verily Satan is an enemy to you: so treat him as an enemy. He only invites his adherents, that they may become Companions of the Blazing Fire.** [35:6]
>
> **If a suggestion from Satan assail thy (mind), seek refuge with God; for He heareth and knoweth (all things). Those who fear God, when a thought of evil from Satan assaults them, bring God to remembrance, when lo! They see (aright)! But their brethren (the evil ones) plunge them deeper into error, and never relax (their efforts).** [7:200–02]

Experiencing the climate of the Qur'anic dialogue between God and Satan exposes Satan's acrimonious position towards man. It is thus evident that he is bent on destroying man and undermining the lofty station God has lifted him to. Satan does this in reaction to God ousting him from the domain of His Mercy for having failed to obey His orders. Thus, there is no shadow of a doubt that the idea that Satan has not been

done justice, in that he is a true believer deep down, is a ludicrous one. On the contrary, a picture of a psychopath comes across very clearly. The manifestations of this picture are his disobeying God's orders and the positions he takes that are induced by selfish reactions, without giving a considered thought to the consequences of his actions to his destiny in this world and the hereafter.

"The End"

Mohammad Hussain Fadhlullah

# ISLAM

## The Religion of Dialogue

Through the Holy Qur'an, Islam had come to be the religion of dialogue, which allowed the intellect to think at will, to talk about anything, and debate with others on the basis of proof and evidence. The aim was to reach a conviction and new horizons by way of civilized dialogue and good counsel, and with that which is the best. Islam had progressed and so had the experiences of dialogue. Muslims had come to know how to open up to the world with their message through the climate of dialogue. Their education and experience taught them how to respect those who differed with them, with a veiw to winning them over on grounds of respect for their ideology and outlook.

Since the Qur'an is the book of dialogue, as this book is attempting to clarify, we ought to work towards creating the society of dialogue in which Islam opens its arms to all other modes of thinking, and in which the Islamic society opens its doors to all other societies. That said, it is essential that dialogue is protected with controls that are capable of protecting it from exploitation for ulterior motives. The fact that dialogue is not trouble-free should not necessarily mean that we should do away with it. On the contrary, this should prod us into studying these problems within its activity. In so doing, we would make the best out of both worlds – dialogue with responsibility and freedom with accountability within a general order for the ummah.

In this book, we have done our best to raise a raft of ideas concerning dialogue as a Qur'anic code of practice for Islam, man, and life. We hope that it will contribute towards creating some stimulus on the ground, all in the cause of man and society that are governed and guided by dialogue.

The Author

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